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An illustration of five cowboys on horseback, viewed from behind, riding across a rocky, hilly landscape. The cowboys are wearing various hats and clothing, including a red shirt and a blue poncho. Two of the cowboys are holding long wooden poles or lances. The background is a bright yellow sky.

THE DARK RAIDERS

They plundered by day and killed by
night—until they tangled with the kid
from the Arizona border

E. E. HALLERAN

A burst of firing shattered the moonlit night as Ward crouched just beyond the patch of dirt being fought over by Ortega's scouts and the Burnside riders.

With any luck, Ward thought, the enemies would wipe each other out, and he wouldn't have to raise a finger. With any luck . . . but a man with Ward's kind of luck couldn't stay out of a fight, and he knew it. As the attack grew in fury, Ward heard a sudden noise behind him and whirled to find one of Burnside's men just a few yards away.

"That you, Ward?"

"Sure. Who else?"

"Give me a hand, will you? I stopped a couple. Kinda bad."

Ward made a move toward the man. Not stopping to figure if it could be a trap, not hesitating to help this man he hated—until suddenly fire blazed from the gun hand of the Burnside rider. That was Ward's kind of luck . . .

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The DARK RAIDERS

**AN ORIGINAL
GOLD MEDAL NOVEL**

by E. E. Halleran

**Gold Medal Books
FAWCETT PUBLICATIONS, INC.
Greenwich, Conn.**

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First Printing, November 1960

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Printed in the United States of America

CHAPTER ONE

IT WAS ONLY a little past daybreak when a straight stretch of trail opened ahead to show Ward the smoke. For a moment or two he tried to tell himself that this was just a pocket of night mist still lingering in the pass, but he rejected the thought even as it came. Owen Ward had seen a lot of that gray, smudgy kind of smoke. It brought back a hundred unhappy memories.

Too far away to be the wagon outfit he had been overhauling for the past couple of days, he told himself. He had been close to them before making camp last night and he had started his weary mules on the trail at an early hour. Those greenhorn wagoners wouldn't be more than a mile ahead and this smoke was farther up the pass.

Then the pines crowded down into the narrow gap which carried the trail between shouldering mountains and he lost sight of the ominous cloud. He used the opportunity to check the rigs on the laboring pack mules which dragged reluctantly behind the big roan saddle horse. Then he tensed forward slightly in the saddle, gray eyes intent upon the wheel marks he had been studying so much of late. He had gotten mighty curious about the wagon outfit ahead. Every track they left behind them fairly shouted of greenness, and to Ward that meant settlers. No emigrants except those heading for Perdita Valley would be likely to be using this trail, so Ward had taken a sort of proprietary interest in them. Since they were potential customers of the Hawksley-Ward enterprises it behooved him to keep an eye on them. Now with that smoke ahead he knew that he ought to push on with some show

of speed. Maybe his pet pilgrims would be needing a mite of help.

Nearly a mile farther along, he rode into another opening. The sunshine was warm on his broad shoulders and exaggerated the length of his lean body in its shadow. He was sitting erect in the scuffed saddle now, keen eyes intent and the angular lines of his jaw rigid with concentration. He could see the smoke clearly now and it made him think of barns burning in the Shenandoah. He could almost imagine the sickening smell that always seemed to go with that greasy, streaky smoke.

The memory made him uneasy and he let the roan plod across the opening, thus giving himself time to make some guesses. Judging by the movement of the smoke whorls, he was now less than a mile from the scene. He passed the spot where the wagon outfit had spent the night, scarcely noting the litter of tin cans they had left behind, even though it had been the cans which had first brought their sign to his attention. In a country where game abounded only the rawest newcomers would live entirely out of airtights. He estimated that they had moved up into the pass shortly before his arrival, so it seemed likely that they would have reached the scene of the fire by this time.

He didn't even consider the possibility that this might be their fire. Owen Ward had spent a good many years in making himself a shrewd observer and now he was using his powers almost instinctively. He knew that the distance to an unknown smoke could be estimated by the apparent speed of the smoke's movement, and he knew that there was a marked difference between the rise of smoke from a hot fire and smoke from a dying one. Without conscious reasoning he marked this as a dying fire but one of some size. Too big for a cooking fire and too small to be brush or timber. Just the right size to spell trouble.

He was about to send the roan into a narrow gulch which started the last climb into the pass as his quick eye caught a flicker of movement on the height above and to his right. It was only a glimpse, caught by the outer rim of vision, but to Owen Ward that was enough. Much of his life had been spent in watching for little movements like that one, and his present existence was in large part due to the skill he had developed in interpreting such sights. That figure on the

skyline had been a mounted Apache. Apaches on the mountain and smoke in the pass was a combination no man with Ward's experience would ignore.

He pulled the roan up sharply, frowning as he searched the timber for more movement. The frown did odd things to the lean, brown features, adding years and making the unshaven chin look all the more rugged. Sometimes Owen Ward's mild appearance fooled people into thinking him younger than his thirty-two years; a smile gave him a really youthful look while a full grin suggested a somewhat tough but good-natured urchin. The beard and the frown changed all that. Back of the frown were grim campaigns in Virginia and along the Arizona border. Some of this any observer could see in the frown. A smart observer would see even more.

He slid from the saddle with the ease of long practice, untying the lead ropes of the two pack mules and turning the animals aside into a pine thicket where he tethered them securely. Then he was back on the roan again, reaching behind him for his slicker roll as he spurred the bronc into a dead run. His movements were automatic now; he knew what he had to do and he wasn't a man to waste time in doing it.

Giving the roan his head, he removed the extra Colt revolver from the bedroll and stuck it into the waistband of his shabby levis, first making sure that it was properly loaded and in good working order. The Winchester in the saddle scabbard and the Colt at his right thigh needed no such inspection. Their examination had been a matter of morning habit. He knew that they were ready for use.

When the slicker roll was back in place he turned his attention to the trail ahead, still riding hard but with every sense alert to the danger he knew had to be expected. Not for an instant did he doubt his conclusions; it had been too clear for comfort. Still he ran over the main facts that crawled through his mind, long practice making such review a matter of habit.

There were three light wagons ahead. Five men and a woman. Three four-horse teams with six extra horses. This was the greenhorn outfit that had left a trail of empty cans and other indications of rawness. Their carelessness had been apparent at every camp—and there had been no improvement, even after the army courier had passed with the word of Apaches raiding to the south.

That same rider had carried a personal message to Ward from Ben Hawksley, a message as disturbing as the Apache report. So Ward had forced the pace a little, only mildly interested in the story that the woman ahead was young and pretty. With a tale of Apaches to the south and Ben's report of trouble in Perdita Valley he wanted to close in on the strangers, but not for purely social reasons. Now he knew that his haste had not been a result of unnecessary alarm. The Apaches must have come much farther north than usual.

The trail was good even in the gulch and he made fast time, watching the pines all the while. Apaches didn't often range through this timbered mountain country, but when they did they could take full advantage of the cover. He had to expect the worst.

Then the valley opened out again and he had a chance to study the slopes on each side. That first figure he had seen high on the shoulder of the mountain must have been a scout. The Indian's position would have been almost above the gulch Ward was now traversing. Unless the scout had been behind a band that was climbing out of the pass there was a good chance that the warriors were almost down to this level again. Ward didn't consider the possibility that the Apaches were continuing on out of the valley. The only sensible guess was that they had caused the earlier fire and had been leaving the scene when they spotted the approach of the wagons. They would be coming back.

With Ward this was not at all a matter of jumping at conclusions. He had had experience with raiders of many kinds and he knew how to read the signs. Today the sign said Apaches, and Apaches meant trouble and then more trouble. He had to be ready for it. And he had to warn those pilgrims up ahead.

He pushed the roan a little harder, risking a possible ambush in order to gain time. When nothing happened he decided that his first guess had been correct. That scout he had seen was a rear guard who had spotted the wagons. Now it was only a question of how long it would take for the warrior to call his fellows back to their second lot of victims. Ward had no doubt whatever that the smoke marked an earlier raid.

He kept low in the saddle as the crowding summits closed in on the pass once more, leaving room only for the trail and

the tiny brooks it followed. Now he was asking himself questions. How green were the wagoners? Could they help themselves in the fight that he was sure would develop, or would they be as helpless in trouble as they had appeared on the trail? And how big was the Apache band?

He slowed the pace as the gulch continued to narrow, the sweat coming to his palms at the thought of the target he made for lurking savages. Still nothing happened and now he could smell the smoke ahead. One way or another he was due for some kind of an answer within a mighty short time.

Then the gulch opened up a little and he could check on his previous guesses. He had been right about the main facts. Three light-topped wagons, five men and a woman. They had halted just short of a smoldering mass which he knew instantly to be the remains of a pair of freight wagons. There was little left but ashes and the skeletal iron, but Ward had had plenty of chances to see what a burned wagon looked like. No doubt about it; two freight outfits had been attacked and burned sometime about dawn. The butchered oxen lay a little to one side, one of them hacked sickeningly where the raiders had cut beef. Butchered alive, probably. Apaches on the warpath would do things like that.

Then he realized that at least two of the newcomers were not the greenhorns he had supposed. Bull Perrine and Hell-fire Burnside had been on the frontier a long time, long enough for Ward to know them all too well. The notion crossed his mind that he had made a natural mistake in his sign-reading, mistaking laziness for inexperience, but he pushed the thought aside. This was no time to be protecting his own ego as a sign-reader. Nor could he afford to let the presence of a pair of old enemies divert him from the danger that threatened. Maybe he should even be glad to have Burnside and Perrine on hand; if it came to a fight they'd do well enough.

At first he could see no sign of any dead so he kept his attention on the people he had come to warn. The third man was a lanky, red-shirted fellow who was obviously a teamster, but the other two were a real surprise. Preachers, by their somber garb. The woman he could judge only by what the courier had told him. At the moment she had her face averted, probably unwilling to look at the grisly mess by the fire.

As he reined in beside the familiar pair he saw something he

had missed at first. Three horribly mutilated bodies lay at the rim of the graying ashes, one of the corpses so badly burned that it was hard to tell that it had ever been human. The others were identifiable as the remains of white men. No more than that.

"You bossin' this outfit, Perrine?" he demanded abruptly, no expression showing in voice and features. He hated the thought of the burly man being so close to Perdita Valley, but for the moment he preferred to keep matters on a friendly basis. The common danger dictated an alliance.

The heavy head wagged slowly, black eyes squinting balefully though the whiskers parted in a sour grin. "Lookit, Hellsfire! Our old pard, Owen Ward! Cap'n Ward, that is." He made an awkward, mocking bow as he spoke, the tone as well as the gesture telling a story. "Looks like we're safe as all hell now. Good old Cap'n Ward has rode up to save us from the damned redskins."

The smaller man at his shoulder didn't seem to think there was so much humor in the situation. Hellsfire Burnside was not very big, but his black reputation was large enough—and ugly enough. Now his close-set eyes were keen on Ward as he broke in, "Shut up, Bull. This here's no picnic party."

"Answer me," Ward snapped. "Who's boss of this outfit?"

Perrine's reply still carried a broad hint of mockery, but this time it was for someone else. He waved a big paw toward the clerical-looking men by the wagons. "Mostly it seems like we ain't got none. But yuh might have a try at Perfesser Giles over there. He done the hirin'."

Ward nodded, his voice taking on a swift urgency as he said, "Get ready for trouble. I think the devils that did this job will be back." Then he swung the roan around toward the black-coated men.

Behind him Perrine laughed. "What the hell! Sounds like good ole Owen ain't so happy about his red brothers. Musta changed some."

"Don't be a damned fool!" Burnside growled. "He seen them burned bottles in the fire. Even a Injun-lover knows yuh can't depend on drunken Apaches fer nothin'."

It was something of a compliment, Ward thought, the idea flashing across his mind even as more urgent matters demanded his attention. Burnside was remembering the old Ward reputation for sign-reading, and was putting into words

the idea which Ward had practically assumed at a glance. The Apaches who had burned the freight wagons were drunk. They would be howling fiends if they came back for another strike.

The thought made him brisk as he faced the two men he had scarcely noticed until now. "Get your guns ready and loaded," he ordered, the tone of command almost mechanical. "Hell is going to break loose around here any minute now."

Suddenly he realized that he was not making much of an impression on either of the two travelers. He saw that there was little resemblance between them except for the black coats. The smaller man wore clean but faded levis under the frock coat, with a gray flannel shirt adding to the contradiction. He was round-faced but lean-bodied, white hair framing the ruddy complexion to give him an almost cherubic appearance. It was the taller man who seemed to have brought an overpowering load of dignity to the frontier.

Or maybe it wasn't just dignity. The big black hat and the coat had stamped him as a preacher, but now Ward realized that the tall man was something of a dandy. Black eyes glared from beneath bushy black brows and the sharp features took on an almost satanic flavor from the pointed beard which he wore so carefully trimmed. Perrine had called him "Perrfesser." Probably a stage magician or something similar.

"I'm not trying to be funny," Ward barked. "The Apaches who burned these wagons seem to be heading back here for another try. Time's wasting; get ready to defend yourselves!"

The tall man didn't alter his expression. He was a little scornful, angry. "Kindly restrain your excitement, sir," he retorted, the careful accents none the less supercilious. "We did not come into this country to make war."

For an instant Ward was speechless before this calm stupidity. Then he turned to urge on the hurrying teamsters who were running to their wagons. He noticed that neither Perrine nor Burnside was wearing a gun. That was odd. Hellsfire Burnside had been a notorious gun-slinger for a long time. The man hadn't looked right without it, but until now Ward had not taken time to realize what had been different about him.

The bearded man raised his voice. "No guns, men. Remember my orders."

"Don't be a damned fool!" Ward raged. "You're dealing

with drunken Apaches. You haven't got a goddam thing to say about whether you'll fight or not. It's that or get murdered!" He waved the teamsters on although they had not actually stopped at the tall man's order. "Move! Get extra ammunition out. No telling how big a band we've got to meet." It didn't make sense that he should have to force them this way when the danger was so apparent.

The bearded man took a step forward, his ponderous dignity seeming unreal. Ward had to look hard to make himself believe that the man was serious. There was no mistaking the tone, however. "You will stop giving orders here, sir! No one asked for your interference and I'll not permit you to stir up trouble."

Ward stared in perplexity, resentful of the delay but scarcely knowing how to meet such arrogant stupidity. Over his shoulder he heard Perrine yell, "Better listen to the polecat, Perfesser. I hate his damned guts but he knows Apaches."

Almost at the same moment the short man broke in apologetically. "We're not unappreciative of your good intentions, sir, but we want no part in violence. The country is at peace. We wish to keep it that way."

Ward swung the roan angrily, not knowing how to reply to such educated nonsense. "Look around that fire!" he growled as he kneed the horse toward the line of wagons. "We're lucky they haven't hit us already—while you stand there talking like idiots!"

As he moved he heard a yell on the ridge to the north. The meaning of it struck home at once. Apaches didn't indulge in foolish warnings. Obviously the raiding band was pretty thoroughly drunk. Nothing else could explain the yell—or the delay.

He had intended to ride into the brush, preparing to make his fight from cover rather than to stay with the crazy wagon outfit. Now he changed his mind. Against a drunken charge there might be some safety in numbers, even the kind of numbers he could count here.

Relapsing into the old habit of command, he shouted instructions to Perrine and the others, posting his men at the points where it seemed they might be most effective. The red-shirted teamster was to take the rear of the wagon line with the double-barreled shotgun he had produced. Perrine

would cover one side of the same wagon, the side from which the attack almost certainly would come. Burnside, now buckling on the familiar gunbelt, could handle the middle. Ward himself would take the head of the train. Neither of the other men had yet made a move. They probably didn't even have weapons.

Before anything else could happen the bearded man spoke again, his voice a little less hostile but still carrying a ring of authority.

"Did you say that these are Chiricahuas on the mountain?"

"I think so. Why?"

"Then I believe I can make myself understood in their dialect. I propose to assure them that we come as friends—not enemies, as these other men must have been. You will please do nothing to endanger the peace."

Ward could scarcely believe his ears, but the smaller man was nodding approval as though this show of idiocy made some kind of sense. "It's your scalp," Ward told him grimly. "I promise nothing."

He swung the roan behind the wagons and dismounted, slipping his rifle from its boot. A wisp of smoke brought the stench of burned flesh to his nostrils. There was no time to wonder about what kind of lunatics he had fallen among. He had to get into position near the spot where the silent woman held the heads of the lead team. Even drunken Apaches wouldn't be delaying much longer.

CHAPTER ❖ TWO

AS WARD HURRIED ALONG toward the head of the little wagon train he heard the bearded man shout at the teamsters, "What do you mean by bringing out weapons? I gave strict orders about that! We were to carry no guns in this train!"

No one paid any attention to him, so Ward called, "Stay ready but hold your fire, men. The professor is going to try talk. Burnside, you'd better change to the front end of the line. I'll take the middle. Watch out that they don't flank you. They were on the north slope but we can't figure that they'll stay on that side."

Burnside nodded without any particular expression as he passed, and Ward knew a moment of grim humor that he and Hellsfire should now be preparing to operate as allies. Nothing but an Apache attack could have brought about such a strange arrangement. At the same time he felt an uneasiness at finding Burnside and Perrine heading into Perdita Valley, but there was no time to let it bother him. He went to where the woman was holding the lead horses. Catching full sight of her smooth features, he realized that the soldier-courier had not exaggerated. The girl was pretty enough, her frown taking nothing away from her obvious beauty. Wisps of blonde hair showed from beneath her faded sunbonnet but a sprinkle of freckles on her pert nose hinted that the bonnet had not done its duty too well.

"You'd better take cover, miss," he told her quietly. "Just in case the oratory doesn't work out as well as the gent thinks it will."

"There is no need for sarcasm," she retorted. "I'll remain here."

He handed her the extra Colt. "Just in case. Don't be afraid to use it."

He made it terse, mostly because he felt that way. Time was running out—and having a pretty girl around wasn't going to help any. A man always felt the pressure of that extra responsibility.

To his surprise she met his gaze with the same level stare as she took the gun. Her voice was as cold as her blue eyes as he asked, "No speech?"

"What do you mean?" He was as puzzled by her as he had been by the bearded man.

She shrugged a little. "I expected more dramatics. After the way you dashed in here like the courier of doom, I anticipated real melodrama. Isn't it a regular part of the show for you to remind me that I should save the last bullet for myself? I'm sure I've heard it that way."

At that moment he stopped thinking of her as a pretty girl. She was as much of an idiot as that fool with the whiskers. At least he wouldn't need to worry about her when the fight started. She had it coming to her.

"Don't wait," he snapped, his anger breaking through. "Go ahead and shoot yourself now before you get any nastier!" Then he ran back to the spot he had picked for himself at the back of the wagon. He hoped those damned Apaches would show soon; if he didn't have a chance to take out his ire on something he would probably make a complete fool of himself. Of all the crazy people . . .

He pulled himself together enough to look around at the preparations the three teamsters were making. At least they seemed to have sense enough to realize that there was only one way to deal with drunken, kill-crazy renegades. All three of them had slipped in beneath the wagons, taking their orders from Bull Perrine. The two black-coated men still remained in the open between the trail and the brush which fringed the creek. Ward could not hear what they were saying to each other and he didn't care. It certainly wouldn't make much sense.

Another hail sounded from the opposite mountain, a little more subdued this time and not so far away. Those drunken raiders were throwing caution to the winds, probably confident that they could do as they pleased with the wagoners along the creek. Maybe they were numerous enough to be cocky, drunk or sober. Ward studied the slope and waited,

trying to figure out what this unpredictable enemy might do.

While he was considering the chances he saw the little man in levis and frock coat coming across to him. Actually he was slightly below medium height, Ward realized; he had looked small beside the tall man. He was clean shaven, a little ruddy of complexion, and mild looking in spite of his present air of concern.

"I hope you will permit Professor Giles his opportunity if Apaches appear," he told Ward. "The professor is one of our foremost authorities on the American Indian and I'm sure he will make them understand our peaceful motives. Please do nothing rash. I'm sure there will be no repetition of that other unfortunate affair." He gestured toward the smoking ruin of the freight wagons.

Ward was past arguing. "I'll let him talk," he said shortly. "But my advice is for you to take shelter just the same."

The little man nodded and hurried back toward his tall partner. Ward looked over the defense positions again. The teamsters were following his orders. The blonde girl still held the heads of the lead horses, his Colt dangling from her free hand. She was dangerously exposed, but there seemed to be no possible point in arguing with her. Anyway, she was valuable at that spot. She might prevent a stampede of the teams if the attack should come as expected. As long as she was going to be stubborn, she might as well be useful.

Then his roving eye caught a movement on the northern slope, not far above the brush which lined the brook. He had happened to look at exactly the right spot at exactly the right time to see a dark head with a grimy white turban move behind a pine sapling. It was gone before he could focus his eyes on the spot, but he had seen enough to be sure.

"They're up there, Professor," he called to the tall man, keeping his tone completely casual. "Better start making that speech of yours."

Out of the corner of his eye he saw that Professor Giles had taken a step toward the brook as though expecting an audience to appear there. The Apache Ward had seen was less than thirty yards up the slope, so it seemed possible that the audience might actually be there, waiting for something very different from peace talk. Ward kept his rifle on the timber just above the tall man's head, ready to meet the first violent move of the enemy. He couldn't stop Giles from be-

ing a fool, but he didn't have to make a fool of himself.

A little to the right of the spot he was watching he saw something move, but he didn't let it divert his concentration. The Indians up there on the hillside would have spotted the professor by this time. They would be working toward him. Ward proposed to have the danger area constantly in his sights depending on the other men to meet whatever attack should come from the flanks.

The tall man looked around dubiously as though not certain whether to accept advice from this interloper who had treated him so brusquely. Then he appeared to make up his mind. Raising his voice, he began to talk, using words which Ward vaguely recognized. Border duty had let him learn something of the Chiricahua tongue, so he knew that the tall man actually had some knowledge of it. Probably it was such a scholarly knowledge that no real Apache would understand it, but that didn't make any difference. At least Ward didn't think so. These renegades hadn't come down the mountain to listen to any speeches.

Then he saw the stealthy movements he had been anticipating. At least two enemies were there among the pines, just above the creek level. Liquor had made them clumsy and Ward had no difficulty in locating them, although he could not get a clear view of either. The tiny movements of boughs told him plenty; they were moving in on the camp, aiming directly for the orating man in black.

Ward bellied down at the tail of the wagon, watching the hillside over rifle sights, waiting for the opening move of the Apaches. For the moment they seemed curious enough to keep quiet while they studied the tall man, but that silence would not last. The blood lust had been on them before they gulped those last drinks. Now it was only a matter of letting them commit themselves.

Suddenly Professor Giles stopped speaking, apparently groping for the proper Apache words to fill the rest of his explanations. Ward had the impression of a blank silence having fallen across the little gulch with the break in words, a flat emptiness in which only tension remained. It was an impression he had known before on the eve of battle and he didn't stop this time to wonder why he felt that way. Somewhere on the slope to the rear a bird twittered contentedly; a horse shook himself until the harness rings jingled;

another horse snorted impatiently—and on the northern slope a drunken Apache stumbled among some dry brush. Even the smoldering fire set up a tiny crackling as flames finally reached in among the smothering ashes to search out a bit of combustible that had escaped the main fire. None of it seemed real; the scene still left Ward with the feeling of a numb silence.

The sensation lasted only a second or two. Then smoke drifted across in front of him and he heard Professor Giles cough. The spell was broken. Up among the pines an Apache wavered to his feet, taking dead aim at Giles. Time had run out.

Just as Ward moved the Winchester muzzle to line his sights on the impatient savage, there was the slam of a gun somewhere near the rear of the wagon line. Two shots boomed from the timber as Ward snapped his own effort, seeing his target go down to thresh wildly in the underbrush for a moment or two and then lie still. At least he was conscious that it was happening that way, although his immediate attention had already shifted to a different target. There was no time to get foolish about fallen foes, all he could do was to roll hard to get away from his own muzzle-smoke while he sighted on another Apache.

There was no lack of targets. At least four had sprung into view just across the creek. Apparently not all of the raiders were as drunkenly clumsy as the one Ward had just shot. Some of them had sneaked almost into the opening without betraying themselves. With some little whimsy Ward reminded himself of an old lesson he thought he had learned perfectly—that it is never wise to underestimate the Apache. Then he was firing instead of thinking, cutting down a pair of leaping savages in the creek itself, turning his rifle on a third one who had raced in from a slight angle to swing an axe at the prone form of Giles. Ward hadn't seen the tall man go down but he had a hunch that the axe wielder wasn't doing him any harm. Giles was dead—and a moment later the Indian with the axe was in the same unfortunate condition.

Suddenly a new danger intruded itself into Ward's consciousness. A wagon wheel almost ran over his legs. He rolled clear and raced along the side of the moving vehicle to where the blonde girl was trying to halt the frantic team.

She was hanging on desperately but was being dragged along by the horses. Suddenly an Apache dashed in as though to seize her. Ward jumped in front of her, clubbing the Indian to earth with the barrel of his rifle and then throwing his full weight into stopping the team.

It took several seconds to accomplish the task, and in the interval he was swung around by the horses until his back was to the scene of battle. When he recovered himself it was too late for him to make the move that was needed. The warrior he had knocked down was scrambling to his knees, bringing a gun to bear.

For a split second Ward had all the sensations of a man being caught empty-handed in the full glare of a blinding light while an enemy fired at him. He was helpless, off-balance, actually threatened by the still plunging team. He saw the Apache steady himself and swing the gun muzzle upward. Then a gun roared—but it was not the one the Indian was raising. The raider buckled at the waist and went to the ground in an untidy heap.

Ward completed the job of getting the team under control, vaguely aware that the firing had ceased. Somewhere up on the mountain a voice was yelling orders in what didn't sound quite like the Apache tongue. Back at the end of the wagon line Bull Perrine was cursing joyously at the repulse of the attack. Much closer to Owen Ward, a girl whose sunbonnet had fallen back to show bright braids was staring down at a smoking revolver and a dead Apache warrior.

"Nice work, miss," Ward said politely as he steadied the horses. "Sorry I said what I did a while back."

He didn't know exactly what he expected her to say or do in reply. A collapse, hysteria, nervous triumph—anything of the sort might have been her reaction. But what she did was to stare at him with the same cold disapproval. "I had no choice. Once you brought the fight down upon us it was a matter of survival."

"I brought—"

"Of course you did! The moment you started shooting there was not a thing Professor Giles could do to keep the peace. You killed him just as certainly as though it had been your bullet that struck him!"

He throttled the angry retort that wanted to come. There was no point in telling her that his had not been the open-

ing shot. Nor was it important; only chance had made it happen the way it did. The significant thing was that she still thought the fight had been unnecessary. There was no arguing with that kind of lunacy.

"Hold the team," he said shortly. He saw that Burnside had deserted his post and was with Perrine at the rear. Ward hadn't noticed the move but it made him wonder. He hurried along to where his two old enemies were looking down at the prone figure of the red-shirted man. Perrine stood up to meet him as he approached. "Looks like we druv 'em," he growled out of the corner of his mouth. "But pore Jake got it plumb center. Tough."

"Keep your eyes peeled," Ward reminded him. "There may be more of them." He swung away again, unmindful that Burnside and Perrine had started along the fringe of the clearing to make sure that all the Apaches were dead. He heard a couple of shots and knew what they were doing but he had no desire to interfere. Brutal work of the sort just suited the pair—and at the moment it was handy to have them around.

He crossed to where the smaller of the train proprietors stooped over the hacked body of Professor Giles. "Dead before he fell," the little man said in a strained voice. "I saw what happened."

There was no trace of blame in the man's voice. He seemed almost numb, as though not quite appreciating what had just happened.

"Better give the girl a hand with the horses," Ward suggested. "I'll take a look around."

"You're wounded," the little man said, still in that tone of wonder.

Ward followed his glance and saw the bloody patch below his own knee. It made him realize that this stranger was not the only one who had developed a numbness out of the excitement. Vaguely he recalled having felt a sharp pain somewhere along in the early moments of the skirmish, maybe at the very first exchange of shots. But he had not known that he had been hit.

"Not bad," he said with a twisted grin. "I've been walking on it, so it can't be much."

He saw that a wounded horse was causing trouble with the team the girl was trying to hold, so he limped across

to cut the animal out. It took a little time, but he saw that he was getting prompt and efficient assistance from both the girl and the man, whom she called "Father." It seemed to him now that he needed to readjust his appraisal of them. He had stamped them as fools but somehow the name did not fit. They had a remarkable talent for remaining cool when hysteria might have been expected, and he wondered about them. Certainly they were odd types.

Perrine finished off the last wounded Indian and came across to grin at Ward. "Kinda knocked hell out of 'em fer all that loudmouth chief up on the ridge kept yelpin' 'em on. Hellsfire and me got three. Jake got one with the scatter gun before he got kilt. I don't reckon as how more'n two or three got away to join the big noise what was smart enough to stay in the woods."

"Stay ready," Ward cautioned. "Loudmouth may have some reserves up there. They may try to recover their dead. As soon as I tend to this scratch on my leg I'll help you square things away around here."

He went to his horse first, pleased to see that the animal had not been injured by the brief but vicious burst of firing. There was an army battle dressing in one of the saddlebags. He took it across to the edge of the brook where he sat down and rolled up a trouser leg to look at the wound. It wasn't much, only a small furrow across the outer edge of the calf, but it was sending a steady trickle of blood down into his boot. It would not be dangerous but it would be a nuisance for a man who had lots of things to do. And it would likely stiffen up and get pretty painful. Hurt legs would usually get that way if a man kept on using them.

He forced his attention to the business of cleaning the wound, swabbing out fragments of cloth that had stuck in it and trying to make himself forget the curiosity which only now was beginning to be a part of conscious thought. What kind of crazy outfit had he run across? Who were these "professors" and what were they doing in the mountains? Or more important—what kind of raiding band had they just defeated?

To his astonishment he heard the blonde girl's cool voice just above his head. "You'd better let me take care of that. Your bandages aren't exactly clean, you know."

He let a wry grin try itself on for size. It didn't fit. The

girl wasn't looking for any expression of good will. So he nodded. "Even critical when you play angel of mercy," he commented. "Don't bother about me."

He could see the slight flush which came to her cheek but then she pushed in and took over the chore of dressing the wound, not even bothering to make any reply. The grin came to his lips again but this time it was not an expression of impatience. He was simply enjoying the curve of a shoulder which was now so close to his face. She had rearranged the sunbonnet so that the shoulder was about all the scenery that was available to him. He decided that it was worth at least a small grin.

When she had finished she stood up to study her own work with a critical eye, apparently paying no attention to any part of the man except the injured leg.

"Thanks," Ward said. "Even if you do make me feel like a busted table getting mended."

"No matter," she told him. "I'd do it for anyone. Even for one of those savages—if your friend Perrine had left any of the wounded alive."

"Perrine's no friend of mine," he replied. "But I won't condemn him if he's been finishing off the wounded. At a time like this there's not much else to be done. Just feel lucky they didn't get a chance to do the same chore for us."

This time she did not reply. She turned her back and crossed over to where the little man was trying to move the body of Professor Giles.

"Seems like you and her don't git along real good." Perrine's voice rumbled from behind Ward. "Shame, seems like. She's a right purty gal."

"I didn't notice," Ward lied. "Help me up and we'll get to work."

CHAPTER ❖ THREE

EVERYONE PITCHED IN at the grisly chore of burying the dead. There was no talk except for the essentials. Ward had expected that the little man might propose to take the body of his partner along to some better burial site, but no such suggestion was made and the bearded man went into the same grave with the red-shirted teamster and the victims of the earlier massacre. Apparently the full meaning of the affair had begun to impress itself on the smaller man and he was as alert as the others to the possibility of a new attack.

The dead Apaches were left as they had fallen, Ward pointing out that there was a point to be gained by doing this. "Apaches like to carry off their dead. If we leave them to the job they're not so likely to follow your wagons. Any help you can get will be worth it."

"How far through the pass?" the little man asked.

"Maybe a mile to the summit. After that it's easy. These men can show you; they know the country well enough."

This statement brought a look of surprise, and he saw that Perrine and his weasel-faced partner were exchanging uneasy glances. Obviously they had not mentioned to their employers that they had ever been into this part of the country before.

"My name is Henninger. Professor Henninger," the little man said suddenly. "What should we do next?"

It sounded like a peace overture but Ward was in no mood for the social turn. His leg was beginning to hurt now, after having worked on it for an hour. All he wanted was to get clear of this company of lunatics and recover his mules. He

had lost a lot of time that he could not afford. And Apaches were not the only problem that he had to keep in mind. It was beginning to be clear that something was developing—something he didn't like or understand.

"Scrape some of the ashes over the grave," he said curtly. "Hide it."

He would have left them then and started back along the trail, but he knew that it would be foolhardy. As yet he did not know how many Apaches were on the mountain. He had to know a few more facts before he could risk going back to bring his mules up through this danger area.

Professor Henninger wasn't to be put aside so easily. "I think we owe you an apology, sir. We scorned your advice—and I am sure that my daughter said some unfair things to you—but I will admit frankly that I think we owe you our lives."

Ward took the outstretched hand, his mind fastening on that last bit of information. So the blonde girl was Henninger's daughter. They certainly did not look much alike. The man was round-faced and small-boned; the daughter was tall for a woman, her oval face indicating an entirely different bone structure. He almost grinned at the thought. It really wasn't the bone structure that was interesting.

"Forget it," he said. "Apaches in the pass are everybody's headache. Maybe mine more than yours. I've got to go back and bring up a pair of pack mules I left along the trail. So I'll ask you to hold your wagons right here until one of your men can give me a hand at scouting the hillside. Maybe we can figure what they're likely to do next."

"Give your orders," Henninger said quietly.

The blonde girl turned away in evident annoyance at her father. Obviously she was not in sympathy with his apology. Ward let her go. He swung to face Perrine. "Want to back me while I take a look, Bull?"

The big man pulled a wolfish grin. "Takin' a chance, ain't yuh, Owen? There's been times in the past when yuh wouldn't ha' let me git next to yuh in the woods."

"Not behind me, anyway. But today I'll risk it. I want to know where these raiders came from and where they went. I don't think they're all Chiricahuas."

"Nope. A couple of 'em wasn't even full Apaches. Breeds o' some kind. So lead on. This time I'm on your side."

Both men checked their weapons and then Ward led the

way across the creek and into the brush that marked the first rise of the northern slope. Almost at once he caught the glint of a bottle. It was empty but there was still a distinctive odor when he lifted it to take a sniff.

"Brandy," he told the big man. "Who ever needed to supply Apaches with fancy liquor like that?"

Perrine shook his head. "There was more of 'em back there by the creek. Likewise brandy. The varmints must ha' raided a cache of the stuff."

Ward shrugged and started to work his way along the slope, favoring the lame leg as much as possible. Perrine flanked him at a distance of about ten yards, close enough to watch the brush Ward was searching but far enough away so that both wouldn't walk into the same trap. It took a good half hour to cover the area but finally he signaled to Perrine and the pair of them headed back toward the brook.

"Ten men in the attack proper. One dead in the bushes and another crawled away to where another pair helped him get clear. Looks like we hurt 'em bad."

He repeated the remark to the waiting people around the wagons. "Unless I'm way off with my guesses we won't need to expect any further attack. What bothers me is the clear indication that this was no ordinary Indian raid. I think this band was made up of renegades from several tribes as well as some mixed bloods."

Burnside nodded grimly. "That man on the mountain wasn't yellin' plain Apache. What d'yuh make of it?"

"Maybe I should ask you."

He ignored the obvious surprise that his remark brought to the faces of the Henningers, watching for a reaction from either Burnside or Perrine. To his disappointment they both seemed honestly puzzled.

"Don't be a damned fool!" Burnside snapped. "Would we set ourselves up as targets for drunken varmints like them?"

"Forget it," Ward advised curtly. He didn't propose to go into any talk of his private suspicions just now. Certainly not with Perrine and Burnside. If this raid was connected in any way with Hawksley's report of trouble in the valley he preferred to do his own thinking.

"Will we be able to proceed now?" Henninger asked, brushing aside the show of enmity which he obviously didn't understand.

"Just as soon as you can get your teams reorganized,"

Ward told him. "Make it fast and you can get through the pass into Perdita Valley by mid-afternoon. Another night might get real unhealthy up here."

"What about you?"

"I'm going back for my mules."

"With that wounded leg?"

Ward grimaced. "Rather with it than without it. I'll do all right. Forget me and clear out of this mess."

"Why not let one of our party go back with you? We're in no hurry."

"No point in delay. You and your daughter will each have to drive a wagon. That is, you'll have to if you want Bull to ride scout for you. Until you get through the pass it would be smart to handle it like that. So you'd have nobody to spare."

"I suppose you're right. You were all along, of course." He looked around as though to see whether the blonde girl had heard this repetition of humility. Then he added briskly, "I've already identified myself, sir. Maybe I should explain our mission into this country."

Ward simply nodded, although he had been wondering how to work up to a question on the subject. In the course of working around the wagons he had discovered that one of the vehicles was rather well supplied with digging tools. Emigrants might be expected to have a few such tools along but the wagon contained too many picks and shovels. With Perdita Valley enjoying the kind of reputation it did—and with Bull Perrine along with the wagoners—it was not a pleasant thought for Owen Ward.

"My line is geology," Henninger went on. "I joined forces with a well-known anthropologist—Edwin Giles—in the hope we might economize in some small way by doubling up. He came to study the tribes of northern New Mexico, while I proposed to examine the structure of the mountains in an effort to get some light on a very interesting theory about the formation of the rock strata underlying them." After that he added in a slightly different tone, "My daughter Marion is also something of a scientist. She expects to write a history of the region and her work has been in close cooperation with Professor Giles." He let that last statement dangle a little. Ward did not know why. Perhaps there had been something personal between the girl and the bearded man; perhaps it

was merely a matter of professional cooperation.

"An interesting combination of subjects for people headed into a valley full of lost treasure stories," he commented, making his voice sound casual but keeping alert to changes of expression.

Professor Henninger looked startled but recovered himself quickly. "What do you mean by that, sir?" He was a bit crisp now.

Ward let the small-boy grin come across his face. "Pretty clear, isn't it? The country's full of treasure stories. I find folks arriving with a lot of shovels and picks. One of 'em is an expert on rocks. Others have had experience with the stories of the region. And they've hired a couple of old time plunder hunters to drive their wagons. It adds up real neat."

He managed to watch all four faces at the same time—enough to guess at the reactions of each. Henninger was flustered although he was trying to pass it off as a joke. The blonde girl was completely surprised—or she was a very fine actress. Perrine and Burnside simply acted natural. They were uneasy, sullen, defiant.

"Speakin' o' plunder hunters," Burnside snarled, his rather thin voice sounding a little higher than usual. "What about yerself?"

Ward shrugged. "Partly reformed. Partly disgusted. I'll give you all the benefit of my experience. I spent more time hunting the Maximilian loot than anybody else did. It's not there. I don't think it ever was." He let the grin come again, wryly this time, as he added, "I don't suppose it'll make a particle of difference to any of you—but that's the way with people who get plunder-happy. Go ahead and find out for yourselves. That's how I got rid of the fever."

He didn't wait to see what they would try to make of the remark. He simply hobbled across to his horse and climbed into the saddle, all too well aware that the injured leg was beginning to bother him a lot. More to hide his discomfort than anything else, he turned for a parting word of advice. "Don't get careless because we beat them off this time. If the survivors get help you'll be in for trouble. Sober Apaches won't be as foolhardy as these drunken ones were."

Then he was moving off down the trail, not looking back. There had been quite enough delay. McCready needed those repair parts that the mules were carrying and Hawksley must

be getting impatient also. At least his message had hinted at some real worry.

He tried to make himself forget the pain in his leg by forcing his mind to the series of puzzles which had thrown themselves at him in the midst of all the drama. That study occupied him for a good three quarters of a mile—but then his alert eye stood him in good stead once more. Plain in front of him were the fresh hoof marks of an unshod pony. It had come down from the northern slope to move down the trail to the east.

Perdita Valley was forgotten in an instant. What was happening in the valley was not so important as what was happening down the pass. Nor was it as practical a consideration—and Ward was a practical man. He could not afford to occupy himself with wild guesses about the valley when he had hard facts in front of him demanding an interpretation.

One point was clear enough. An Apache—probably a survivor of the fight—had come down from the mountain to backtrack the party which had slain so many of his fellow warriors. But why? Was he going for help? Was another band raiding somewhere to the east?

A careful study of the trail did not indicate any particular haste on the part of the rider. The warrior had seemed to move with a certain amount of caution, flanking the trail rather than following it. Ward decided that the survivors, possibly stronger in numbers than he had hoped, were planning a new attack on the wagon outfit in an effort to avenge their defeat. A scout had been sent back to learn whether any other white men were coming up through the pass.

Or maybe they knew that one volunteer had arrived to aid in the defense of the wagons. Maybe they even were aware of the mules that had been left behind. Their scout had been sent to learn the true status of the wagon train, perhaps with orders to ambush the man who would have to return for his mules. If the latter guess was correct, the Apache didn't think much of the white man's ability to read trails. At least he wasn't making much effort to hide his tracks.

He pulled up for a couple of minutes, trying to reason it out so that it would make better sense. He could only guess at a part of the story, but he was certain that the fight had sobered the raiders. They would be doubly tough now. And he was surrounded—or at least he was between two fires. One war-

rior was ahead and there was a strong possibility that the others already were closing in on his rear, forgetting the wagoners in order to make sure of the lone victim. It didn't add up to a happy sum.

He tried to estimate the time that had elapsed since the Apache had passed. Again he could only guess. Even allowing for the time that had been spent in burying the dead and checking the sign on the mountain there would have been scant time for any complicated moves on the part of the raiders. The reasonable guess still made this lone rider a scout. He had been sent back simply to guard against possible interference with a renewed attack on the wagons. Ward decided to work on that assumption, risking the chance that there might even now be other Apaches behind him.

He pushed on then, realizing that his conclusions now made other bits of reasoning easy. By this time the Apache would have found the mules. He would know that the white man was alone. He would know that the white man would be returning for the picketed animals. So what would the Apache do? First he would kill the mules. Probably he had done that already. After that he might swing wide to the ridge in order to rejoin his companions and report—or he might try to ambush the owner of the mules. One way or another, there was no point in expecting him to come back along this trail.

Ward built a smoke and took time to let the routine of smoking settle his thoughts and his nerves. Then he pinched out the cigarette and started up the south slope of the pass, leading the horse now and picking a path that would offer the best concealment. His leg was painng him more at every step but he was willing to put up with the discomfort. There were worse things than a sore leg.

When he was well above the trail he leveled off to lead the horse toward the east, closing in on the point where he had left the mules, then halting again. He had a deadly game to play—with an opponent who was probably an expert at this sort of thing—but it was a game that left him no choice. And it was added insurance for those wagons. There would not likely be another attack until the Apaches had heard from their scout.

He tried to put himself in the Chiricahua's place. The Apache would feel sure that the white man would come back

for the mules. He would wait close to the spot where the mules had been tethered, rather than risk any movement westward along the trail.

Ward grinned wryly to himself. This was a fine way for a man to be celebrating his bid for a solid, respectable career! Out in the woods trying to make himself think like an Apache.

Finally he left his horse, first taking the precaution of unloading the rifle and taking the cartridges with him. In case the Apaches outguessed him he didn't propose to stand fire from his own Winchester. For the job at hand he preferred to depend on the twin Colts.

Walking was becoming increasingly painful. The leg wound started to bleed almost as soon as he had slid from the saddle and as he went forward away from the roan he knew that his boot was getting full of blood. He stopped twice to adjust the bandage but there was not much that could be done with the blood-soaked linen. He had to put up with the discomfort and hope that he could locate the Apache before the bleeding became dangerous.

It was long past noon when he worked into the area where he believed the real danger to be. By that time weariness was hitting him hard, and he wondered whether loss of blood might not be making itself felt. He rested for a moment but did not examine the wound, a little fearful of what he might find. Then he moved forward again, knowing that there was only one way to get this job done.

He crawled the next hundred yards, playing Indian for all it might be worth. He could see the place where the trees thinned out, so he knew that the mules had been left only a short distance down the valley from where he was. Because he felt sure that he had not slipped past the waiting Chiricahua he had to assume that the enemy was now within gun range. The deadly game was running to its climax.

The midday heat was bringing out the sweat but he felt cold. Twice he lay at full length, trying to steady himself and at the same time plan his movements so as to take full advantage of available cover. The chance that the Apache would be on this side of the trail was his biggest hope. If the man had set his ambush on the opposite slope he would still be in the best position for the first shot which might end the whole thing. Meanwhile he had to remember that the Apache would be anticipating his every move. The delay in

the white man's return would tell the savage that there would be a countermove rather than a simple blundering into ambush. The Indian would be alert.

Ten feet and a halt to study the gorge from behind a juniper. Ten feet more and another halt. That was the way it went for what seemed like a half day. Then Ward saw the mules. Both were dead, their throats cut. The packs had been ripped open, the contents strewn around. There was an instant in which Ward found a grim humor in picturing the Apache's disappointment at sight of the pipe fittings, dynamite sticks, detonator caps and similar equipment. It was a passing humor. As yet there was no certainty that the joke was on the Indian.

With the dead mules directly below him he inched down the slope a foot or two at a time. Reason told him that the Apache would have located his ambush far enough up the trail so that he might hope to kill the white man before the slaughter of the mules could be discovered. Maybe the Indian had changed his position after the long delay had warned him that he would not achieve complete surprise. Maybe he had given up the ambush and had slipped away to carry word to his fellows.

That wasn't likely, Ward decided, squirming into a spot where he could scan a fair section of the trail. The Apache should still be in the vicinity. On the other slope, almost surely. Like the rest of the band he would be something of a rebel, out for quick glory. He would not leave a spot where he had a fine opportunity to take a scalp, particularly since he needed some sort of victory to atone for the humiliation of the morning. Already this warrior had retreated from a fight, leaving tribal dead behind him. He would be eager for revenge. So he was here. He had to be.

Still another thought suggested that the ambush was on the northern slope. The Indians had been using that shoulder of the mountain. The Apache's pony would be up there somewhere in case of the need for retreat. So the warrior would stick to the same side of the trail.

One of those fleeting grins swept across his lips but this time it didn't bring with it the youthful appearance. There was too much pain behind it and its humor was largely a matter of whimsy. Ward could be amused at the way he was working things out so neatly in his mind—but he wasn't go-

ing to make any mistakes based on those neat, logical conclusions. A really smart man always assumed that he would make some mistakes; his smartness came in allowing for those mistakes.

Still he thought he knew most of the answers. The Apache was really there on that opposite slope, probably hiding in a clump of bushes to match the one Ward occupied. He would be just a few yards up the hill and a bit to the left of the dead mules. Or he would be if it could be assumed that he was a smart savage—and most Apaches were.

A clump of junipers stood green against the brown of old brush at the spot Ward was considering. It *had* to be the ambush of the Chiricahua. But why wouldn't the polecat make some kind of move?

The heat was getting worse as the sun swung around to send its rays the length of the gulch. Ward was sorry he had not brought a canteen. In the same instant he was glad he hadn't. Thirst was better than being hampered by a utensil that might betray him with its awkwardness.

He wondered if his wound was making him flighty. The craziest thoughts kept coming—like that bit about the canteen. Or brief moments of wondering how the wagon outfit was doing. He still hadn't had time to think much about the Henninger party, so he hadn't decided whether that scientific talk had been real or only a cover for another treasure-hunter madman. And he hadn't let his mind consider the blonde girl. Somehow he had liked the wench, nasty as she was.

Then a more sobering thought came. This Indian was certainly showing remarkable patience, far more than one might expect of a warrior who was partly drunk and partly demoralized by defeat. It was almost as though the fellow had a particular reason to ambush Owen Ward. Was it possible that the Indian attack had actually been aimed at Ward rather than at the Henninger party? Had the delay in attack been a result of the Apaches having to change their plans?

Pretty silly, Ward told himself. His mind must be wandering. He was making up ideas all on the strength of the fact that an Apache insisted on doing a good job of Apache skulking. He had to pull himself together, wound or no wound.

For another ten minutes he stared hard at the junipers, forcing his attention to the danger spot and trying to make

himself forget those other stupid thoughts which wanted to flit through his weary mind. Finally he had to risk a cautious movement as cramps threatened the kinked leg. Still he kept the probable enemy position in sight, old habits carrying him along. He didn't like to admit that those old habits could be so strong, particularly when he had taken some pride in turning himself into a completely different person—but at the same time he could be a little grateful. Just now he needed that extra help. That damned Apache had to be there!

CHAPTER ❖ FOUR

HE ROLLED CAUTIOUSLY, extending the injured leg and trying to stretch knotted muscles. When the motion drew no sign of attention from the opposite slope he risked doubling himself into a knot so that he could massage some of the worst of the pain away. It made him realize what a mess the leg had become, that he had lost a considerable amount of blood. No wonder he was having so many odd flights of fancy; the weakness was getting him down.

He rested deliberately for several minutes, the cramps leaving him and only the dull ache of the wound remaining. Then he eased back into position once more, just a little pleased with himself. The small exercise in self-control was satisfying. Owen Ward, the old Indian fighter, was still able to play his hard-learned game.

Go ahead and gloat, he told himself, you'll need all the encouragement you can get. That devil over there in the bushes is just waiting for you to keel over.

Then another thought occurred to him. Maybe the Indian was asleep. If he had been half as drunk as the warriors who had blundered headlong into the wagon defenses, there was a good chance that the liquor had caught up to him when he took his ambush post. Ward grimaced. At first the idea had sounded good; maybe he could take advantage of it. Then he knew that it was only another temptation to take a foolish risk. He still had to play the waiting game.

Twenty minutes later, with patience beginning to run out, he heard the first evidence to bolster his fading determination. Far up on the opposite mountain a horse had nickered faintly.

So far so good. He had called the turn on the location of the Apache's horse. So the Indian really was down here in the valley, still waiting.

Then a pair of carrion crows settled upon the carcass of one of the dead mules. Ward had not seen the scavengers winging their way to their quarry so he knew that they had come up the pass—and without any sign of alarm. It meant that the Apache was not in that direction. The crows would have spotted him if he had been down there. Now the clump of juniper looked more menacing than ever.

The crows were an added risk, he realized. Other crows would probably follow, sensing the success of their fellows. The next ones might fly above his hiding place and betray him. There was the same risk for the Apache, but Ward was not interested in the odds of this game. At the moment he had the small advantage of having the enemy unaware of his presence and he didn't want to give up that tiny edge. He would need it.

More minutes passed. The crows tore at mule flesh. The sun hit him in the eyes. Thirst made him want to cough. His leg hurt. The afternoon was slipping away.

Then he decided to risk a small move. He looked around until he found a chip of rock which suited his purpose. Laying his gun on the ground, he wormed into a position where he could throw without having his arm brush any branches. He even studied the intended path of the missile, trying to make sure that the stone would not strike a tree on the way to its target. Then he threw, the movement a snap throw from a half-crouch.

Instantly he went flat on his belly again, gun in hand. The stone seemed to hover in the air interminably, but then he saw the flick of a cedar bough as it struck. At least his throwing was fairly good. He had put the rock squarely into the cedars where he believed the Apache to be.

For a few seconds he thought he had drawn a blank. Then there was a rustle of movement about ten feet to the right of where the juniper bough had moved. This was it. He had guessed right. That Apache had to find out what had moved so close to him.

Both crows flew up with raucous caws, giving him additional evidence. They had seen the movements of the ambushed Indian. Ward knew a sense of fierce triumph. He

was about to out-maneuver and out-wait an Apache. Not many white men had done it. Now he had to find out whether his own growing weariness and tension would hurt his marksmanship. It was a long shot for a hand gun under the best of conditions.

Then the Indian made his mistake, apparently thinking that the crows might have seen something down the trail. He swung to make sure that he was screened from that angle—and his move left him exposed to Ward's view. It was the perfect opportunity. The Colt leveled, steadied, and bucked against Ward's palm. It was as simple—and as deadly—as that. Ward felt no compunction at killing the fellow so coldly. In Apache warfare a man could not afford the luxury of playing games. Giving an Apache a sporting chance was not in the code. It was too dangerous to be considered.

He waited only long enough to let the muzzle smoke clear away. Then he looked again and saw a wisp of cloth showing between the junipers. He put two slugs into it before he made any further move. A wounded Apache could kill a man just as dead as any other kind could.

He worked his way down the trail, but ignored the fallen enemy, partly because he knew he did not dare waste his energy in climbing the other slope. Instead he made his way to the dead mules. There had been some canned goods in the packs and he saw that the Apache had not carried them away. With his knife he hacked open a can of tomatoes and gulped them greedily. Then he turned to hobble back along the trail. He hoped the refreshment would permit him to reach the picketed roan.

He was never quite sure how he made it. A drink at the brook helped a little before he began to climb the hill, but still he had to do his climbing at a painful crawl. Twice he slumped to the rocky hillside in exhaustion but each time summoned enough energy to go on. Finally the horse was there ahead of him and he pulled himself up by a stirrup, steadying for a moment to shake off the dizziness. Then he moved the bronc to a spot where there was good graze. After that he simply collapsed.

It was dark when he regained consciousness. A small attempt at movement warned him that he was too lame to consider night travel, so he went back to sleep again after making sure that the horse had remained near him. For a

moment or two his mind went back to that strange wagon outfit with its crazy people. He decided that they had gotten through into Perdita Valley all right. At the moment he didn't have the inclination to think much more about them.

Daylight was beginning to make a reluctant appearance over the lower end of the pass when he awoke again. This time he managed to climb to his feet without getting quite so dizzy. The roan waited patiently and permitted Ward to approach. As an experienced rider Ward knew a brief regret that the horse had gone so long without having been unsaddled but at the same time he heaved a sigh of relief that he didn't have to handle the heavy rig. Probably he could not have managed it.

Hard rations from a saddlebag and water from the canteen helped him to feel a little less like something inhuman and he used a brief spurt of energy to haul himself painfully into the saddle. Then, steadying himself with both hands, he eased his mount down the slope. He still had to run the gauntlet of the probable Apache position but it was a risk he had to take.

On the valley floor he halted to scan the ground for sign but found none more recent than his own. If the missing Indians had doubled back they had been careful to keep clear of the trail itself. He covered a mile slowly and with all possible caution, hoping that he would not have to release his hold on the saddle horn to grab for a gun. He was afraid he might fall off before he could even aim the weapon. Then he reached the scene of the wagon-burning and found that the dead Indians had been carried away. The trail suggested that they had been hauled off to the south.

That suited him well enough. It hinted that the raiders had given up and left the region. In a vague sort of way he realized that there was something dramatically tragic about a few—maybe only two—surviving savages risking further punishment to carry off their dead. A crazy sentimentalist like that Professor Giles—or maybe even the blonde girl—could make a big thing of it. Ward knew only relief. While the Apaches were freighting out their own corpses they wouldn't have time for trying to make more. After a man has fought such tribesmen for a few years he can think like that and forget the sentiment.

He passed the spring which marked the source of the

brook, a tiny stream which would trickle into the North Canadian somewhere to the east. Just above was the divide itself and beyond that, Perdita Valley, part of the Pecos watershed. All through here the sign was plain enough. The Henninger wagons had moved steadily and without interruption. When he saw that they had reached the long downgrade he felt a quick satisfaction. Down there among the greens and brown of the valley they would be safe enough.

He wondered why he was concerned. So far they had meant nothing but trouble and threats of more trouble. For one thing, he could not understand how anybody—even a pedant like that man Giles—could have been so blind to the danger into which they had been plunged. Was it just a matter of scholarly people being pretty stupid about things beyond their bookish knowledge, or was this really some kind of treasure-hunting expedition? Plunder madness could make people like that—and the presence of Perrine and Burnside with the party was pretty suggestive.

In a vague way he realized that he wasn't really worried about the safety of the party. He was bothered over what they might do to Perdita Valley. The valley, with its plans, represented his bid for something new in life. What had just been happening was too much of a throwback to the old days.

He studied the valley through the first break in the trees, seeing it as he had been seeing it for the past couple of years. Roughly oval at its northern end, it narrowed away to the south where the creek broke through another barrier of hills. Some of the land was already under cultivation but the broad northern expanse showed the lighter greens of natural pasturage. Not many settlers had come this far away from the town of Perdita Springs.

Leaving the wagon ruts at the foot of the long grade, he cut sharply to the left, picking an almost imperceptible trail along the lower slopes of the eastern fringe of hills. The trail which the Henninger wagons had followed was an easier one, cutting across the flat valley to the creek and bordering the winding stream for the scant three miles to the little town of Perdita Springs. The short cut was rougher but a mile shorter. Ward took the short trail, not knowing how long his faltering strength would hold out. A mile could make a difference.

Twice he regretted his decision, wishing he had taken the longer trail so that he might have stopped at one of the nester cabins for help, but each time he recovered from his attack of weakness and pushed on. He didn't dare to stop for any kind of rest; all he could do was to push onward and hope he could get to Doc's before the blackness settled down completely.

The last mile was covered in a brown haze that almost hid the trail from his bleary eyes. Somehow he kept himself awake, finally sending the roan into the little town at a very careful walk. A small bit of pride came to him at that moment and he held himself just a little more erect than he had thought possible. He didn't propose to fall off his horse now—with people looking at him.

It was only vaguely that he came to realize that there didn't seem to be anyone in town to look. Perdita Springs had been a bustling little place in late winter—just before he'd ridden east to pick up those supplies for the sawmill—a busy little town full of emigrants who displayed energy and enthusiasm. Now it seemed vacant. The knowledge fought for recognition in his numbed mind but he couldn't quite get the hang of it. He wasn't even sure that his eyes were not playing tricks.

By an effort of concentration he held himself in the saddle until he was in front of the old adobe which had been repaired and turned into a small but clean dwelling, a neat sign on its front announcing that herein was to be found James R. Stimax, M. D. The place looked as deserted as the rest of Perdita Springs but this time Ward accepted it as the normal condition. Doc Stimax had always claimed that the Spanish influence had done one really fine thing for this part of the country. It had introduced the siesta. Somewhat dimly Ward realized that the silence of the town was to be explained in the same manner as the quiet of Doc's office. He even chuckled a little at his own dullness in not having thought of it sooner.

He partly fell from the saddle, remembering to drop the roan's reins over the animal's head. Then he staggered through the doorway, groping to find a straight chair into which he could sink. It was cooler inside but the darkness annoyed him. It wasn't supposed to be so dark. Maybe the blackness was coming on him again.

Then he was on a cot, a slightly built man bending over him. "Howdy, Doc," he husked. "Sorry to steal your bed."

"Drink this," the thin man ordered. "I just broke the seal. You don't have to believe it if you don't want to."

Ward managed a grin. "You sound guilty, Doc. But I believe you." He swallowed the whiskey with a couple of gulps and let himself lie back, feeling the fiery bite of the liquor and not caring much.

Doc Stimax turned away, readying instruments and bandages. "How come you were so long getting here, Owen? That little professor fellow said you'd probably be right along behind them last night. That leg's overdue for proper attention."

"Couple o' chores needed doing, Doc. Ask me later. I'm tuckered."

Stimax refilled the glass and ordered, "Have another good slug. I might as well get you properly knocked out before I start on this leg. No use having you squawking at me while I work."

Ward obeyed. He knew Stimax well enough to be sure that the harsh tone was the little man's way of covering a real apprehension. Apparently the leg was going to get some rough attention.

Two big jolts of raw liquor on an empty stomach finished the work of shock and exhaustion. He knew when the doctor started to unwrap the blood-caked bandage, the pull of it painful enough to hint at what was to come. Then he lost track of what was happening, only knowing a slight feeling of embarrassment at his own weakness.

"Keep your fool head down!" Stimax growled, pushing against Ward's shoulder as the injured man tried to sit up. The push wasn't needed. Ward lay quiet for a minute or so and then his eye managed to focus on a freshly bandaged leg.

"What the hell!" he exclaimed weakly. "Did I pass out altogether?"

"Most intelligent thing you've done lately," the doctor assured him. "The chore's done. Nothing really bad there, just bad treatment. A few days of rest and you'll be as cantankerous as ever."

"Then I'll start right away. Got anything to eat?" He knew that the whiskey was still having its full effect but it did not make him forget his hunger.

Stimax grinned. "You'll get fed. Norma Hawksley saw

your horse and came over to see what was going on." He chuckled dryly as he added, "I almost had to throw her out. She wanted to help. I told her to get Ben over here to take care of you after I got finished."

"That's different," Ward muttered. "Usually the grave digger cleans up after your jobs."

Stimax chuckled again. "Feelin' nasty already, eh? Good. The Hawksleys are going to take you over to their place, where Norma can cluck about you all she pleases."

Ward closed his eyes wearily. He didn't want to think about Norma Hawksley. She always made such an elaborate pretense of being severe with him that her real feelings were much too apparent. He hoped Ben didn't mind. This was no time for partners to be having troubles of that kind.

"What's all this talk about Dark Raiders in the valley, Doc?" he asked abruptly. "I had a message from Ben about it."

"Hard to tell what's really happening. Right after you left there were a couple of fire raids against nesters up at the north end of the valley. One fellow lost a lean-to. Nothing important. Ed McCready says that somebody tried to set fire to one of his lumber piles at the sawmill and Ortega reported a crazy attack on one of his line camps. No damage worth mentioning. Just a lot of fuss and rumors. But folks are real edgy about it."

"Anybody see any of the raiders?"

"No. Just shapes in the night—like the old story goes. Some of us thought the Utes were out. Then he heard about the Apaches being on the loose south of here. It could be either—but it didn't sound like Indians to me."

"But you don't think the old treasure yarn has come to life again?"

"I don't know. There's been no talk of it. Not in public, at least. Ben and I discussed it. He thought perhaps some of the new men who came in with Ortega might have ideas about it."

"You agree?"

"No evidence along that line. Ortega seems all right. He's simply trying to get his place built up to something like what it used to be."

Ward wanted to follow up the questioning but he couldn't make his brain behave for more than a few moments at a

time. Ortega, Utes, Apaches, the Dark Raiders, Norma Hawksley—everything seemed to dissolve into a hopeless muddle.

While he was trying to sort out some sane thoughts he heard voices at the front door and suddenly two familiar tall figures loomed over his cot. Ben Hawksley was better than six feet but built so powerfully that it was easy to ignore his height. Beside him his wife seemed small but Ward knew that she was one of the tallest women he had ever known. Not many women could stand five feet ten without looking awkward, but Norma Hawksley managed it quite nicely. With a perfect figure and cheerfully youthful features she could make any man look twice—and neither time would he pay any attention to her height. Nor did she look her age, the chestnut hair and smoothly browned skin as fresh as when Ward had first met her, nearly ten years before. Being big simply meant that there was more beauty than usual in one person.

"You stink," she announced conversationally as she bent over the cot. "All covered with dirt and full of whiskey! I'm ashamed of you."

Ward caught Ben Hawksley's wink and tried to reply, knowing a quick and almost childlike anger when he found that he couldn't close one eye without having its mate go shut also. Hell! A man must be in mighty bad shape when he couldn't even wink! The flush of anger gave him strength to make a retort.

"Still got a sharp tongue, I notice."

"All right to move him, Doc?" Hawksley inquired, his heavy voice showing a concern which seemed to make him forget his usual pompous manner. Ward caught the point even though he heard the words but dimly. Ben must be worried. Nothing else would make him drop the pose he had so carefully cultivated.

"Carry him carefully," Stimax ordered. "No bones broken but he's pretty weak. Worn out and feeling the loss of blood."

"Not to mention needing a bath," Mrs. Hawksley added. "I think we ought to throw him in the stable tank before we mess up the house with him."

Ward just grinned. He was glad she was taking this tone; it always made him uneasy when she put on the other act.

The Hawksleys carried him between them to the wagon they had brought around, handling him so competently and easily that he was aware of no extra pain until he was placed on the bottom of the light wagon. Then his injured leg took a knock which brought the dizziness again. He knew that Ben was sending the team through an alley and across the open field which separated the big ranch house from the little town. The wagon jolted uncomfortably but the trip was a short one and presently he knew that he was being carried again, this time into the house which had become the center of the Perdita Valley promotion.

After that he knew that he was on a bed, being stripped of his filthy garments. Somebody was giving him a bath, but he never was quite sure who was doing the work. He just hoped that it wasn't Norma Hawksley.

CHAPTER ❖ FIVE

IT WAS PLEASANTLY WARM in the room, the shades having been pulled to within three or four inches of the window sill to keep out the glare and the heat. Ward lay quiet for a minute or two after awakening, getting his bearings and trying to remember what had happened after that rather undignified exit from Doc's place. He had a vague memory of a bath and now he felt clean. He tested a few stiff muscles and decided that he was still alive. Even with so many sore spots, that was something to cheer about.

He raised himself on his elbows so that he could look out beneath the drawn shade, pleased to discover that the movement brought aches but no dizziness. It was about noon, he decided, studying the almost vertical shadows out there along the creek. He must have slept something over twelve hours.

At a little distance he could hear a murmur of voices while somewhat farther away a driver shouted at a team. Insects buzzed at the window sill. Somewhere a songbird whipped up a brief but colorful bar of music. It was all very peaceful.

The patch of landscape seen through the window was just as quiet and sedate. He could see a stretch of the creek bottoms with a couple of cows standing knee-deep to drink, and other cattle grazing on the far side of the stream. Beyond the animals the ground sloped upward to a couple of large buildings and a fair-sized corral just at the edge of a stand of pines. The buildings, the corral, and the grounds all showed evidences of recent care. Obviously this man Ortega had come back to the valley with ideas about putting the rancho into good order.

Thoughts of Ortega brought to mind a flood of questions. Was there any connection between the Mexican and the strange variety of things which had been happening? Ward realized that he didn't know very much about those happenings, so he decided that it was time for him to get out of bed and ask some questions.

He stuck a leg out from under the sheet, quickly discovering that the other leg wasn't going to go along without pain. At the same time he knew that he was jaybird naked and that no garments were within reach. Evidently he was not supposed to get up. He wondered whether this was Doc's idea—or Norma Hawksley's.

Probably hers, he told himself with a wry grin. Even since he had known her—which was ever since he went into partnership with Ben Hawksley—he had noted her delight to trying to shock people. He even thought he knew why she tried to do it. She resented the fact that she was different, so she tried to make herself all the more different. Even though she was a very pretty woman she must have known that almost no man could look at her and think of her only as a woman. Because of her size she was a source of wonder, practically a freak. It didn't matter that she was a beautiful freak. She was never properly flattered when men stared at her, because she always suspected that they were wondering at her size instead of simply being smitten by her charms.

Ward would never have ventured to explain it to her like that, but he had a strong hunch that he was calling the turn mighty close. One way or another, Norma Hawksley always tried to exaggerate the difference between herself and other women. She did things respectable women would not have dared to do and she said things to make even old mountain men blush. At the same time she was careful to preserve her face, her figure and her reputation for faithfulness to her husband.

For Ward, the one part of it all that he didn't like was the suspicion that he was himself of particular interest to her. She made it a point to be particularly critical of him on every occasion, doing it in an exaggerated fashion that was accepted as rough good humor. Quite without vanity Ward had a hunch that she was attracted to him and playing it that way because she had developed a habit of hiding her real feelings behind some chosen role. He could only hope that Ben didn't read her the same way.

While he was letting the thought drift uneasily through his mind Ben came in, his face grave enough so that the crisp mustache and goatee made him look old instead of important. Ben was not a good actor. He over-did the role of grandee when prosperity was upon him and he managed to look ponderously woeful in spite of himself at the smallest bit of adversity.

"Where's my pants?" Ward demanded.

"Got a new outfit comin'," Hawksley told him shortly. "You'll be up soon enough. We got bad news. The Dark Raiders took a whack at the sawmill last night. Made another try at firin' your lumber."

"Any damage?"

"Not too much, I reckon. Sandy Kirk came down with a load of timber this morning and brought the word. Him and McCready had themselves a brisk bit of action durin' the night but neither of them got any kind of a look at the raiders. Drove 'em off before the green lumber could catch fire."

"That the way it happened before? Doc told me something about a raid like that but I was too groggy to catch any details."

"About the same. All the raids seem to go that way. You think it's Apaches?"

"No."

"Why not? They're reported off the reservation."

"Two reasons. None of this sounds like Indian work and I picked up some mighty odd ideas about the Indians who jumped us in the pass. That was no Indian raid but some kind of outlaw job using renegades. Anyway, that particular gang won't be too brash for a while; there's not enough of 'em left."

"We'll go into it later. Ready to eat?"

"Feels like I've been ready for a long time."

There was a pause while Hawksley went to the door and called to someone in another part of the house. Then he came back to the bed, staring down at his partner. "You sure were out of your head last night. Feel better now?"

"Some. I'll do fine with a bit of food in me."

"Doc says you're to lay by for at least a week. You've been on that bad leg too much already."

"We'll see."

A half-grown Mexican girl came in bearing a tray which

held enough tempting food to take Ward's attention completely away from trouble talk. He suddenly knew that he had not exaggerated his hunger. At the moment he wasn't interested in anything but food.

The girl spread the meal on a stool which she pulled to the bedside, smiling brightly at him before leaving the room. She even bowed a little to Ben Hawksley, making the gesture seem a little awkward. Ward wanted to laugh. Evidently Ben was still having trouble in training his employees to play their roles properly. Likely they still couldn't get used to him as their *patrón*.

Ward ate in silence for several minutes but then Ben asked abruptly, "What do you make of it, Owen?"

"Good," Ward told him, his mouth full. "I like a bit of Mexican flavor to my breakfast."

"Don't be a damned fool! I mean these raids!"

"All I know about them is what you and Doc told me. Everything was calm and peaceful when I left the valley six weeks ago."

Hawksley shook his head. "I told you all I know. It just don't make sense. Folks are talkin' nonsense about the Dark Raiders but I ain't seen any trace of a new treasure hunt in the making."

"A joke, maybe? No damage, you said."

"I didn't tell you all of it. Thompson's shed didn't amount to much loss but a train of settlers comin' in from Santa Fe was bushwhacked and the survivors turned back. They've passed to word to others, I reckon, and we ain't having many new customers show up. Some of the folks who are already here are getting might restless."

"I'll stop worrying about the sawmill," Ward told him casually. "If we don't have buyers we won't need that lumber in any hurry."

"Don't try to sound so damned calm! I lost five thousand dollars worth of stuff when they burned that train south of here. I can't afford that—any more than I can afford to lose customers. We've got payments to meet on this deal, you know."

"It's bad, I realize. I was just trying to enjoy my first meal in what seems like a month. But go ahead. What ideas have you picked up?"

"None, dammit! Nobody saw the raiders here in the val-

ley. Nobody that was attacked had any enemies. The train folks claim they were hit by Indians but they were so scared that they didn't know for sure. Most of 'em got away—and I don't figure Apaches would have let that happen."

"Then you think somebody's out to cause trouble for you and me?"

"It adds up that way. No real damage except to your property or mine. But we're getting hurt where we can't stand it—in our business."

Ward, nodded. "Which points a nasty finger straight at this Ortega lad. He could pick up the wreckage if we couldn't make good on our deal. Any idea that he might be back of it?"

The big man shook his head glumly. "Not a thing to point that way. He's been keepin' mostly to himself but he sounds decent enough when I see him."

"How often is that?"

"Once a week, maybe. Comes to buy odds and ends occasionally. We had a bit of gab once but the other times he's just in and out. Seems like he's tending strictly to business over there on his side of the creek. Got a crew workin' and he brought in maybe five hundred head of stock."

"Must be reformed," Ward commented. "He never had any reputation as a worker before."

"How well did you know him?"

"I didn't. While I was still in the army I had to keep an eye on a bunch of Mexicans who were supposed to be cooking up some kind of a scheme to move into Sonora and start a revolt. I learned that one of them was named Ortega and that he was connected with an important family up this way, the black sheep of the family, of course. I didn't know about the Ortegas or about this valley at the time so I didn't pay much attention. It was only much later that I remembered the fact that I'd met this fellow who turned out to be the lost heir to the property."

"Guess I talked outa turn," Hawksley grimaced. "When I was tryin' to be neighborly with him I mentioned that my partner used to know him. I thought at the time that he didn't act real pleased."

"Maybe he's trying to live down his past."

"That's all right with me—but I sure as hell ain't fixing to have him bust up our future. And somebody is tryin' damned hard to do it, what with the Dark Raider stories and

the rumors about you breakin' off the water supply."

"Wait a minute! Nobody told me about that part. What does it mean?"

Hawksley shrugged again. "I don't know. I've just heard talk. I'd say that somebody is making plenty sure that a lot of rumors are in the air."

"Who?"

"Maybe Ortega. I don't know. It could be part of a scheme to put the jinx on this valley. Ortega's the only one I can think of who stands any chance to make anything out of it."

Ward was frowning now. Raids he could understand; rumors were a bit out of his line. "Can't these sod-busters understand that my dam will be to their advantage? I'll use it to power the sawmill but at the same time I'll keep the spring floods from washing away their topsoil and I'll see to it that they get water in the late season when drought might otherwise hurt them. I've got to let the water run if I want to run a millwheel!"

"I've told them that. I've also pointed out that you can't afford to injure the people you expect to buy your lumber. But the rumors keep floating around."

"Any chance that the two raids on the sawmill were made by nesters who believe these rumors?"

"Your guess is as good as mine. I don't think so."

Norma Hawksley came into the room then, bringing new clothing for Ward. "They tell me you're a great big hero, Owen," she said with a smile. "So I reward you with a new outfit. A hero must look the part, you know, especially where there's a pretty girl involved." She dumped the garments on the foot of the bed. "But you'll have to shave. It's no wonder the girl calls you a savage; you look it."

"A savage hero?" he asked, pretending surprise. "How do you make that out?"

"Marion thinks you're a savage; her father calls you a hero. If I were a man I'd rather have it the other way around. She's quite pretty."

"So's a gila monster—if you like that kind of beauty. I'll manage to worry along without having her appreciate my sterling talents."

"We're not interested in the Henningers just now," her husband interrupted. "We've got more . . ."

"Hold it," Ward cut in. "Maybe I didn't mention that this Henninger gent is carrying a load of digging equipment and he's escorted by a couple of old plunder-seekers who spent a lot of time in this valley back about the same time that I first hit here. It could mean something."

"Nonsense!" Norma scoffed. "A geologist has to do some digging. You make too much of those treasure legends."

"Maybe. But there seem to be too many coincidences in this mess." He stared up at her thoughtfully, aware of her very feminine charm in spite of the way she towered over the bed. He couldn't remember ever having known a big woman who had so completely managed to remain all woman. Norma did it. She simply had beauty enough to display it in large quantities. "Maybe you can find out something I'd like to know. See if you can learn when and how they happened to meet up with Perrine and Burnside."

"Why should I draw the chore?"

"Because you're nosey. Now get out of here so I can get dressed."

She made a face at him and left, her husband chuckling at her retreat.

There was little more Ben could tell him. Ortega had appeared at Perdita Springs only a day or two after Ward left to pick up the freight at Raton. He had gone about his business without much fuss, appearing friendly enough. The valley had been quiet. Then the trouble started, perhaps two weeks after Ortega's arrival. A couple of night raids of no consequence. Then the first attempt on the sawmill. Rumors began to fly. Another fortnight passed and then a couple more raids. Finally, only a week earlier, had come the attack on the freight wagons in the southern pass. Only then was there any belief that Apaches had been concerned in any part of it.

"It's not Apaches," Ward said positively. "I'd bet that the gang who hit the emigrant wagons was the same one that took a crack at us. And it adds up. Somebody hired a lot of renegades to keep wagoners from coming into the valley. That same somebody is stirring up other trouble in the valley itself, scaring people with night raids and starting gossip about loss of water. I think we'd better find out some more about this Ortega jasper."

They let it go at that, Ward willing to rest and forget about his earlier ambition to get dressed. He hated to admit his weakness but even the heavy thinking was taking a lot out of him. What he needed was rest so that he could get out and find the truth himself.

Doc Stimax came in the afternoon, changing the dressing on the wound and trying to sound cheerful. He could add no facts to Ward's supply but it was obvious that he didn't like the way the valley talk was going. The rumor about the water was too vicious to be just idle talk. Somebody was working hard at worrying the settlers.

Norma brought supper just before dusk, reporting that she had talked to the Henningers with some success. They had outfitted in Denver and had come south into New Mexico from that point. Somewhere along the line—she didn't know exactly where—they had lost a couple of teamsters who refused to work further for Professor Giles unless they could carry their guns. There had been a bit of delay until Perrine and Burnside applied for the jobs. They had pretended to be without weapons and had been hired. Norma's belief was that the Henningers had no previous knowledge of either man. Perhaps the two treasure hunters had sought them out, but not with anyone in the Henninger party knowing anything about it.

Ward was inclined to accept her estimate. "Find out where the Henningers hail from?" he asked.

"Philadelphia—although I understand that they have been working in various parts of the southwest lately."

"Texas?"

"He didn't mention it. Why?"

"That's where this treasure story starts. Also Ortega was in a Mexican jail just beyond Laredo when Salazar was trying to raise the money to pay his fine. I've got a notion Burnside and Perrine have been in that area also."

"I'll pry a little deeper," she promised with a smile. It was like her that she took things more seriously when they were alone. The banter seemed to be for show only. He wondered about his own guesses on the subject of her true feelings but knew that this was no time to make tests—for any purpose.

"Try 'em tonight," he suggested. "I want all the information I can get before I start out tomorrow."

She shook her head warningly. "Not tomorrow. Doc says you must stay quiet for at least a week."

"Doc's crazy. This is only a scratch on my leg. I'm getting up tomorrow, no matter what he . . . Hey! What do you think you're doing?"

She had picked up the new garments which had been brought for him. Tucking the loose bundle under one arm she headed for the door, answering his frantic question over her shoulder. "I think I'm taking these clothes away so you'll obey Doc's orders. Doesn't it look like that?" Then she went out.

He swore under his breath but then chuckled. The round was hers. For once she could get away with bossing him around. He hoped she was enjoying the occasion.

Vague sounds of household movement came to his ears as he lay there resting and wondering about the Henningers. Maybe he had guessed wrong about the scientist. Maybe it was the blonde girl who had gotten infected with gold fever. Certainly she had resented his presence while her father had not. Maybe she was the one who had something to hide.

Just as quickly he told himself that it wasn't so. He had been watching her when he hinted about the matter that day in the pass. She had simply been puzzled. It had not been a matter of acting, he felt certain. She just did not know about any such thing.

Suddenly he realized that he was no longer hearing the soft subdued sounds of household movement. The murmur of voices from the living room had ceased. No footsteps sounded. The house itself was still, only the tiny noises of the outer night coming to his ears.

It bothered him for a moment or two but then he knew that he must have fallen asleep. Now he had awakened in the middle of the night without at first being aware of the passage of an interval of time. He wondered what time it was and whether he had finally caught up on his lost sleep. It was while he was debating the value of getting out of bed for a look at the sky that he heard a different sound out there in the night. Someone was coming quietly toward the house.

CHAPTER ❖ SIX

THE INJURED LEG gave him a bit of a jolt when he slipped out of bed but he forced himself erect, trying to get his bearings. The room itself was not completely dark and he knew that someone had opened the door a little so that light from a hallway lamp came in. He got his legs under him and moved carefully across toward the open window, hearing the sounds clearly enough now. He knew a moment of wonder that he had heard the stranger before, supposing that it had been only because he had been intent on the night sounds. Now he listened a little more critically and decided that the stranger was either barefooted or wearing moccasins.

He halted beside the window, trying to make up his mind. What had they done with his guns? He had not seen them going into Doc's office. Maybe they were here—perhaps in that combination washstand and dresser. Ben might have left the carbine outside but the gun belt ought to be close.

Good judgment told him that he ought to shout the alarm but the idea had no appeal. He had been forced to play the helpless role to the point where it galled him and he did not propose to yell for help in the middle of the night and then have it turn out to be a false alarm. Having a bullet scrape on his leg was no excuse for making an old granny of himself! Anyway, he wanted to see what was going to happen. Maybe this would tell him something about the mysterious enemy who had never been seen. Certainly he had not learned much by listening to second-hand reports.

His groping hands found the washstand drawer and he slid it open as carefully as possible. The gun outfit and the

extra Colt were both there, a clean smell of oil telling him that somebody had taken care of them. He checked the spare gun with quick fingers and found it empty. Norma's work, he thought; she always objected to having loaded guns in the house.

Outside he could hear the soft scuff of those approaching feet but he forced himself to be deliberate, pulling two shells from the belt loops and jamming them into the gun. There was no time for more. Even as he spun the cylinder to make certain that a cocked hammer would have a shell under it he heard the intruder stop, apparently just beyond the open window.

Only then did Ward realize that he stood completely naked. In the dimly lighted room he could imagine that he would stand out pale against the gloom so he held himself tense, hoping that the unknown prowler would be looking for movement or studying the bed. On that score he could congratulate himself. In sliding out of bed he had flung the covers back in a heap so that in the dimness it looked almost as though someone still lay there.

There was no time for him to feel annoyance at his condition. Just as he stiffened, gun in hand, there was a flash of orange at the window and the room seemed to rock under the blast. A forty-five, Ward thought, and aimed straight at the bed.

Two more shots laced their flames into the bedroom before Ward could turn on the bad leg and get out of the corner where he had halted. The changed angle let him see the gunman as a dark shape just beyond the window but the smoke now filling the room made identification all the more impossible. At the fourth enemy shot Ward took careful aim, trying to put a bullet close to the muzzle blast of the attacker's weapon. He fired grimly, almost savagely, his shot blending with the fifth shot of the stranger's. There was a yell of pain and then the stumbling noise of running feet. The attacker was in full retreat.

Ward limped quickly to the window, leaning out to get clear of the smoke and sighting quickly on a moving shadow. He knew that he had hit his man but that was not enough; he was determined to exact a better measure of payment for this sneaking attempt at cold-blooded murder. He fired quickly and this time there was no yell. Only a sound of a body falling.

By that time the house was in an uproar. Someone came running down the long hallway to thrust the door open and burst into the room. It was Ben Hawksley, his nightshirt flapping about his knees. Ward didn't mind that part but it was a little disconcerting to see two feminine figures directly behind Ben.

"What's all the shootin'?" Hawksley demanded. "Who . . .?"

The frantic question broke off as a little scream blended with a quick giggle behind him. Ward took his cue. "Shut the damned door! Here I am naked as an egg and . . ." He didn't finish. No one had made any move to do a thing except stand and stare so he made a headlong dive for the bed, getting under cover quickly but at a cost of some pain to his leg.

He knew that he cut a pretty ridiculous figure, lying there with the blankets pulled up to his neck and only his head and a hand with a gun in it sticking out. "Gunmen at the windows and women in the doorways! Can't a man have any privacy in this damned house?"

"What happened?" Ben demanded, brushing aside everything else.

Ward told him quickly and the big man charged back into the hallway, bellowing for someone to get a lantern lighted. By that time Professor Henninger had joined the women in the doorway and the story had to be repeated for his benefit. His daughter did the telling, omitting the part about Ward's nakedness. Mrs. Hawksley was not so charitable. She picked up the story at that point saying, "I've heard it said about some of the men in this country that they feel naked without a gun. Professor, you should have seen this crazy creature! He was naked *with* a gun!"

"If folks weren't so nosey they wouldn't see things," Ward told her.

"First time I ever heard of anybody getting dressed up in a bandage to engage in a gunfight," she persisted. "What . . .?" She broke off as if something had caused her to forget her intended gibe. Moving across to the bed she began to examine the bedclothes at close range, the somewhat taut humor turning into an angry murmuring.

"Four bullet holes in a brand new blanket!" she exclaimed "And I suppose I'll find all kinds of damage to the mattress."

"Sorry," Ward told her. "I should have stayed in bed."

Then you could find some damage that would be a consolation to you."

Miss Henninger seemed to think there had been quite enough of this foolish talk. "Do I understand that someone came to the window and deliberately tried to murder you while you were supposed to be in bed?"

"It sure looks that way," Ward replied. "Not bad shooting either."

"Who would do such a thing?"

"Maybe we'll find out. I think I knocked him down with my second slug. Ben's on his way out to take a look."

They could hear voices outside and a lantern bobbed across the open space between the house and the creek. Finally it stopped and they could see figures stooping over something on the ground. There was an interval that seemed long but wasn't; then Ben's voice called, "Dead man here, Owen. Hit twice."

Ward raised up in bed to shout, "Know him?"

"No. Maybe a Mexican but probably a 'breed."

Ward did not reply. He had hoped that here would be some kind of clue to the mystery that had been growing as his major worry. Somebody had tried to murder him during the night. So somebody was mighty anxious to get rid of him. Who?

Norma Hawksley seemed to understand his glum silence. She dropped her air of nervous hilarity to ask soberly, "Got any idea what it means, Owen?"

"Not the slightest. Somebody is sure out to kill me. Maybe that attack up in the pass was aimed for me rather than for the Henninger party. Maybe they just happened along at the wrong time."

"What makes you connect this with what happened in the pass?" Professor Henninger asked.

"Tonight's move was as deliberately murderous as anything I've ever run across. That fellow stood at the window and emptied his gun into this bed, obviously thinking that he was blasting away at a sleeping man. He seemed to know where the bed was because he didn't waste much time after he arrived at the window. All in all I think it's pretty clear that he was definitely out to get me and nobody else. But I haven't done anything to make any enemies since I came back to town. So it seems likely that whoever tried to get

me tonight has been nursing the grudge for some time. That means he might have tried earlier. Maybe he bribed a gang of Apaches with brandy and sent them to ambush me on the mountain. I'm just thinking out loud, of course."

"It sounds reasonable," the little man agreed. "Do you have known enemies in the valley?"

"I hope not. At least I didn't think so. After tonight it's mighty clear that I do. This gunplay wasn't any sociable affair."

He broke off to listen, realizing that men had come across to the house from the town. Ben was explaining what had happened but the other voices were more subdued. Ward thought that one of the newcomers was Bull Perrine but he could not be certain. He would have been more interested to know where Hellsfire Burnside was at the time of the attack. This kind of thing was a lot more along Burnside's line than Perrine's. Bull would take his attack to his enemy in slashing fashion but Burnside might resort to a hired killer. Bull had gotten his name honestly; Burnside was more of a weasel, not only in appearance but in nature.

"I think we might as well go," Marion Henninger said after a pause. "We're doing no one any good here."

Ward turned his attention to her almost for the first time. With so many more critical matters at hand he had scarcely noticed her. Now he saw that she was quite a picture. With the fair hair down her back and a nightgown only half concealing her trim figure she seemed entirely different from the rather grim young woman of the Apache fight.

"Stick around," he invited casually. "You're an improvement over my last caller."

"I might have expected a remark like that," she snapped, turning toward the door.

"Fair enough. You might have expected it. You got it. Just let me know the next time you want some expectations fulfilled."

Norma stared at him with a strange expression on her lips. "Fathead!" she said softly. "You don't have a bit of sense where women are concerned."

He grinned up at her. "Speaking for yourself or the blonde?"

"Maybe a bit of both . . . It fits either way."

Ben came back then, reporting that the body of the gun-

man had been carried over to the town. No one seemed to know the fellow although Joe Beech, the Hawksley hostler, thought he might be a part of the crew Ortega had brought in along with the new herd of cattle. The Ortega vaqueros had not been around town enough for anyone to know them but Beech thought he had seen the man somewhere and the Ortega guess seemed like the most likely one.

That was as much as anyone learned, although daylight found Hawksley carrying out an extended investigation. Ward fretted through the day, getting reports from time to time but learning nothing more. Ben went directly to Ortega and was met by a flat statement that no Ortega hand was missing. Every lead ended against a blank wall.

In the afternoon Norma relented and brought Ward's clothes back again. Doc had been in during the late morning, agreeing reluctantly that the leg was improving faster than he had expected. On the strength of that encouragement Ward managed to dress himself, discovering that the effort took a lot out of him. He rested again, staring out of the window at the creek and the slopes of the Ortega land beyond. Somehow it seemed that there must be some kind of an answer over there. But he couldn't figure what it must be.

Finally he tested the bad leg a little more, walking around the room with due care. When he found that he could bear his weight on it he made his way out into the long hallway which ran the length of the house. Ben Hawksley had taken an immense pride in building this place and Ward had often made jokes about Ben considering himself a combination Jim Bridger, Brigham Young and Coronado. There was a certain amount of seriousness behind the jokes, however. Ben had really taken his own status as a land promoter rather seriously. Having become part owner of an old Spanish tract he had been torn between the desire to play the role of a feudal don and the ambition to make a profit out of the deal by carrying out his real job of bringing in settlers and handling the trade which settlement made possible. Putting on a good show probably helped in the more serious business so Ward had not ragged him too hard about his pretenses.

No one seemed to hear Ward as he moved along through the hallway, using the walls as support, but when he entered the immense living room he saw that three people were already there. By that time he was so unhappily aware of his own

weariness that he was no more concerned about them than he was about the showiness of the big, polished log interior. All he wanted was to reach one of the big armchairs without falling on his face.

Norma Hawksley caught him before he had taken two steps, throwing an arm about him and practically carrying him the rest of the way. She seemed a little flustered by her own action but her laugh was the same bantering one she always used when Ward was around. Speaking to the other two occupants of the room she laughed, "I have to keep this idiot from hurting himself any more. Otherwise I'll never get rid of him."

Ward closed his eyes long enough to let his surge of dizziness pass. Then he looked up to see Professor Henninger and his daughter staring at him. Both were garbed rather more formally than when he had last seen them and he knew that now they were studying him with considerable interest. The blonde girl was prettier than he had thought. He was sorry he had not shaved.

"We've been talking about you," Norma told him. "Nothing good, of course."

"Naturally. But what am I supposed to have done wrong this time?"

"Nothing special. You're bad enough simply being yourself."

"Go easy," he begged. "Miss Henninger already considers me as just a little lower than a Digger Indian. No need to make it worse."

Professor Henninger intervened quickly. "I'm sure neither of us feel anything but gratitude. We have been hearing about the Apache raids and we know that you saved us from being murdered."

The blonde girl didn't add anything, one way or another. Nor did she look particularly happy at the statement. Ward guessed that she probably hated to admit that her father was right. Probably she also recalled some of the unflattering comments that had passed between Ward and herself. A pretty girl could get mighty thin-skinned sometimes.

"Forget it," he told Henninger. "I'm a lot more interested in some of the troubles that still beset us. What's past is past."

"You speak as though you anticipate other dangers," the smaller man said quietly. "Is that by way of warning?"

"It is. I understand that you're planning to visit the north end of the basin. There was a raid up that way last night. It wasn't Apaches, I'm sure, but it could still mean bad trouble. My warning is to stay away from that area until we find out what's going on around here."

"Isn't that your particular part of the valley?" Miss Henninger asked, no trace of expression in either her voice or her smooth features.

"I have a sawmill just north of the valley proper," Ward told her, his reply as expressionless as the question. It would have been much more pleasant to think that she was asking out of interest but he knew better than to deceive himself.

She promptly let him know that he had interpreted her question correctly. Still in the same flat tone she inquired, "You wouldn't be trying to keep us out of your pet area for reasons of your own, would you?"

"Marion!" Her father's disapproval was apparent.

Ward grinned aggravatingly at her. "Now maybe I would, at that," he said. "After all, you folks haven't meant a thing but trouble to me. Maybe I'd be just as well pleased if you didn't get into such dangerous proximity."

"Remember what I told you!" Norma Hawksley cut in, trying desperately to make it all sound like good humor. "The scoundrel is educated. You can see what big words he uses. He had to learn to read and write before they'd make him a captain."

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Hawksley," the blonde girl said, "but there's no point in trying to turn this into a banter. Mr. Ward—I mean Captain Ward—simply has made up his mind that we're trouble makers. I don't believe your efforts will change his mind."

"Spoken like a real female of the species," Ward retorted. "What the lady means is that she decided that she didn't like me and now she doesn't want to back down on her prejudices. But, as I said, it's all right with me. I lost two mules and some hide the other time I tried to be friendly. Let it go."

"You're an idiot," Norma snapped.

CHAPTER VII SEVEN

"I CAN'T FIGURE YOU OUT, Owen," Hawksley growled. "My wife and that blonde girl are mighty pretty women but you wrangle with them as though you hated them."

"I treat all women that way," Ward told him with a grin. "With my fatal charm it's necessary. The only way I can make them leave me alone."

"Smart-aleck! Then don't be sensible! Anyway I didn't get you in here to talk about your bad manners. Doc tells me that Burnside and Perrine tried to pump him about the Maximilian story a little while ago. They mentioned the Dark Raiders as though that was what started them on the subject. But Doc thinks they're on the trail of something a bit more substantial."

"Such as what?"

"He couldn't figure that out. Part of the time they talked as though they thought you had some kind of hint and were just pretending that you'd abandoned treasure hunting. They suggest that your sawmill is just a blind, that you brought in dynamite to do some big digging."

"Sounds reasonable enough. Did Doc think they really believed it?"

"Not quite. He had a hunch that they were on some other trail and were trying to get a rise out of him."

"Was Henninger mentioned?"

"Doc didn't say so. It'll be interesting to see what happens in the morning. We haven't told a soul that the Henningers are moving north tomorrow. I'll be curious to see who gets interested in them when they leave."

"I don't like that part," Ward growled. "Somehow I've got a feeling we're letting these people make targets of themselves."

"You couldn't stop them. They've been restless at the delay and tonight they're getting ready to move on. Daybreak tomorrow morning."

"Maybe we ought to tell them the whole story of this Maximilian treasure. If they know why we're so sure it doesn't exist they may not be so enthusiastic."

Hawksley stared. "How come you're so blamed sure that they're after it?"

"Hunch, maybe. And I'm not so sure it's *they*. I've got a hunch that the girl doesn't even know the story. I think her father stumbled on it in his research, and science went right out of the window when treasure fever set in."

"Maybe. But I've been making a lot of bad jokes about false treasure stories and I haven't seen any change in him. He's hooked—if he's interested at all."

"Try again. This could get serious. We don't know who is trying to do what but I'll offer a small wager that the treasure yarn is involved. Bull and Hellsfire wouldn't be on hand for anything else."

"But why these raids? And why that attempt on your life?"

"Make your own guesses. That's the best I can do."

"All right. Put it this way. On the surface it looks as though somebody is out to wreck us. If they keep people from buying up our land we'll not be able to meet final payments on the purchase. We could lose everything. In that case the gainer would be Ortega. He's the kind of thug—on his record—who might try something like that so the pattern fits. Now why the attacks on you? And do you think that the affair in the pass was aimed at you or at the Henninger party? And what does Henninger's possible treasure lust have to do with it?"

Ward had shut his eyes tiredly. "Too many questions," he complained. "The Ortega theory sounds as good as any—but somehow I can't quite go whole hog for it. On the other questions I'm just plain stuck. We can figure that Ortega may believe Henninger to be in possession of some new information about the treasure, picked up in his research, perhaps. In that case we can figure Perrine and Burnside to be mixed in it somehow. It's their kind of deal, you know."

"Sounds pretty good to me. Maybe they didn't know just

what they were getting into. Maybe that attack on you folks in the pass was something they hadn't counted on. The renegades wouldn't have known that the pair would be with their intended victims. But Perrine and Burnside came to town with the knowledge that you were suspicious about those brandy bottles. Brandy points to some such old time rancho as the Ortega place, where they made their own. They report to Ortega that you have such suspicions and Ortega tries to get you murdered before you can do anything about it. Reasonable?"

"Reasonable," Ward agreed without enthusiasm. "Tomorrow I'm going over to talk to old Salazar. I think he's honest. I'd like to hear his views on the subject of the doings in this valley lately."

It turned out that he did not have to risk the exertion of a trip across the creek to the Ortega holdings. Old Salazar—and no one seemed to know his first name—appeared at the Hawksley home a half hour after dark, accompanied by a bearded fellow whose Spanish blood seemed to have suffered some dilution in a previous generation. The man was dark enough but his blunt features had a marked Anglo-Saxon cast to them. He stood just inside of the bedroom doorway while Hawksley escorted Salazar across to the bedside.

The white-haired old major-domo of the Ortega estate offered a thin hand, his smile of greeting clearly a troubled one. Something in the way he ignored his bearded companion warned Owen that the old man was not happy over his errand or his partner.

There were the usual polite greetings, Salazar's English as precisely correct as ever, but then the old fellow went directly to the point, dark eyes intense under the white shaggy brows. "There has been an attempt on your life, my friend. Perhaps two attempts. One wonders who wishes you ill—and there are some who hint that the very great villain came from our side of the creek. Tonight Don Julio and I came to inspect the dead man. I assure you that the dead man was none of ours."

The man at the door spoke for the first time. It came as a surprise that his tone held no trace of Latin accent. "Julio Gonzales," he announced gruffly. "Segundo for Mr. Ortega. I know the new men that Salazar ain't met yet. This dead jigger's nobody I ever seen before."

"That settles that," Ward replied amiably. There was no point in argument. Salazar was telling the truth and the other fellow probably was not. The important thing was that somebody had thought it smart to make this attempt to act friendly. "And now, Salazar, old friend, how do you get along with your new boss?"

There was just a trace of hesitation in the old man's manner, just a brief flicker of the dark eyes toward the man in the doorway. Then the careful tones resumed. "Don Pablo Ortega is making many changes to improve the rancho. He is an ambitious and energetic man, perhaps too energetic for one as old as I." He spread thin hands in an apologetic gesture as he added, "But I do not need to tell you this. You must know that for yourself."

Ward grinned in some amusement. "Sounds like the rumor has spread."

"What rumor?"

"That Ortega and I have met. Actually I wouldn't know the man if I met him—and I certainly don't have any knowledge of his character and habits. Does he think he knows me?"

Salazar seemed a little disturbed but he answered promptly enough. "He has not said so to me."

Gonzales broke in again. "Salazar sticks around the house and the boss has been out on the range most of the time. I reckon there ain't been much talk about old gossip like that. I can tell you that he don't remember you and was kinda curious over the story that you once knowed him."

They dropped it there with Ward's brief, "We'll get acquainted. What's good for the valley is good for both of us." Two minutes later the visitors were gone and Ben came back to stare quizzically at his partner.

"What do you make of it, Owen?"

"I think Gonzales knew the dead man. Somebody's using old Salazar as a blind, knowing that he has always been our friend. Salazar suspects that he is being used but he doesn't know how."

"Neither do we."

"Right. What else is new?"

"A couple of things. Early this evening Perrine and Burnside rode out of town. They headed north but crossed the brook as soon as they were clear of town. Joe Beech was keep-

ing an eye on them so I know that much. Before they left they were doing a lot of talking around the stores and saloons, prodding the restless folks with crazy talk about the Dark Raiders. Mostly they pretended to be newcomers asking questions but they always managed to make things sound worse after they were finished."

"Newcomers!" Ward exclaimed. "Those two rats scoured this valley for years on the trail of that Maximilian treasure. They know every inch of it and they know every superstition that goes with it. Sounds like they've had the word passed to them that they are to keep the trouble stirring."

"Right. And somebody on the other side of the creek must have passed the word."

"Have you started anybody up into the pass for those fittings and other stuff I had to abandon?"

"Joe Beech and Jack Nye are on their way now. They moved out right after dark as a safety measure. That's how it happened Joe was in the right spot to see Perrine and Burnside make their move."

"I guess that's about all we can do here. Tomorrow morning I'm riding north, bad leg or no bad leg. Somehow I've got a feeling that there are more answers to be found up there than here. Now that the treasure story keeps busting into the mess it's just possible that I ought to keep a closer watch on the canyons."

Ward awoke feeling reasonably fit and he was getting into his clothes without too much discomfort when Norma Hawksley came in—without knocking. She brought breakfast, busy-ing herself with the tray in a rather comic effort to ignore the way he was struggling into his pants.

"Ben sent word back to the house a few moments ago," she announced in a faintly muffled voice. "There was another raid up the valley last night. At Abel Voorhees' place. Abel was awake with a toothache and heard them coming. He drove them off with his scatter gun and he claims he had a real good look at them. It was night, of course, but he says they weren't Indians."

"More Dark Raider talk today, I suppose," he growled.

"Likely. It's getting pretty bad. Ben's worried, I know."

"Who isn't?"

She turned to face him then. "We're all worried, of course.

Are you sure you know what you're doing to ride up there alone today with your leg still not healed?"

"Don't cluck over me! You're bad enough when you try to sound like my old maid aunt."

Mrs. Hawksley laughed shortly. "I'm serious now."

"Good. While you're that way tell me what you know of this Ortega. He didn't show up in the valley until after I left three months ago. In all the other excitement I haven't had time to get the straight story on how Salazar found him and brought him here."

She settled herself in a chair, watching him eat as she replied, "I'm sure Señor Salazar must regret what he did in mistaken loyalty. Not that he will ever admit it, of course. When the Ortega family line seemed to die out he was left with a proper legal claim to the property. The will was perfectly clear. All he had to do was to take over."

"I know that part," Ward interrupted with his mouth full. "I know that he sold us half of the valley so that he could have cash for some kind of scheme that involved finding a true heir. Nobody but a loyal old family retainer like Salazar would have done such a crazy thing."

"Well, he did it! Somehow he learned that this Pablo Ortega, the family black sheep, was alive and in a calaboose in Mexico. He had been reported dead at least three times and if Salazar hadn't made his move when he did, the report might finally have come true. I understand that Pablo was caught in some kind of revolutionary attempt and was due for a meeting with a firing squad. But Salazar bribed some officials and guards to get him loose. Now we have Pablo instead of Salazar as our neighbor."

Ward grunted unhappily. "I guess we can share our regrets with the old man. He used our money and his prospects to make us all a lot unhappier. Or at least that's the way it shapes up now."

"Then you really believe that Pablo Ortega is back of all this?"

"What else is there to believe? The trouble started as soon as he arrived. He's the only one who stands to gain by having such trouble around. The raiders seem to be renegades of several races, the kind of people a border rat like Pablo would know how to round up. What leaves me puzzled is this business of the treasure hunters."

"Maybe Pablo believes the treasure story. Maybe he wants a free foot to conduct a new search."

"Could be. We've just got to keep our eyes open every minute."

He stood up then, moving the breakfast tray to one side. "There's one thing you might manage to do. See if you can get any hint from Salazar about that brandy business. I've got a feeling that the liquor used to bribe those renegades came out of the Ortega cellars. We can't do any direct inquiring but you might use your notable charm and nosiness to get some kind of hint from an impressionable old fellow like Salazar."

"You put it so sweetly," she retorted. "But at least you did use the word 'charm.' I shall treasure the memory."

"Don't let it turn your head. Just remember the nosiness part; it could be more important."

"I'll do it—but maybe we've been guessing wrong about who wants to put a bullet into your miserable hide. Maybe it's simply someone who can't stand your style of humor."

"Could be," he agreed cheerfully. "Now I've got to get started. It's a long trip up to the canyon."

She followed him out into the hallway, her voice lower as she asked, "Getting anxious to chase that blonde some more?"

"Why not?" he asked over his shoulder. "She's just as pretty as you—and almost as poisonous. Maybe I just like 'em that way."

"Oh dear! Another implied compliment. I can scarcely stand it!"

Ben was just coming into the house as they went through the big living room. He glanced at Ward inquiringly. "Dressed to leave?"

"Right."

"Chasing the blonde," Norma put in.

"Not a bad idea," Ben chuckled. "I just had word that the Henningers made camp last night at the mouth of one of the canyons. I didn't understand exactly which one but maybe you can pick them up there and sorta steer them into some spot where you can keep an eye on them. With new raids reported they might need help."

"They don't steer very well," Ward growled. "But I'll give it a try."

"Sure he will," Norma agreed. "I think he's a little cracked about that blonde girl he pretends to hate."

"You're just jealous because I fight as much with her as I do with you."

"Stop it, both of you!" Hawksley snapped good naturedly. "Come on to the stable and I'll give you a hand. Norma, get his gear together, will you?"

They bickered amiably for another few seconds but then the woman went back toward the bedroom, leaving the partners to proceed toward the stable. Ward asked one other question. "I've been forgetting about it with so much happening but I think I ought to know who those people were who were killed in the pass before we were attacked. Know them?"

"Sure. Sam Roseberry's freight outfit. You remember 'em, I guess. Independent freighters who went through here a couple of times. They were goin' east empty to pick up supplies."

"Then they weren't any particular target?"

"Not likely. Just unlucky. That gang set out to pick you off and just couldn't pass up the chance to raise some extra hell. Drunk as you say they were, it seems likely that they hit anybody they happened to see."

"I imagine you're right. And that reminds me, I asked Norma to see what she could find out about Ortega brandy. You might keep it in mind too."

"Right."

"No word that the Henningers were bothered last night?"

"No. Abel's place is several miles this side of the mountains."

"Fair enough. Try to keep me posted of anything that happens here. I'll do the same for you when I can. Right now I think Ortega's the sore spot in this whole business and I think his game is to drive us out of the valley. Whether it's to take back the land by default or whether it's another bit of treasure madness I can't even guess. All I know is that we've got to smoke him out in a hurry before he does any more damage."

"Just bear this in mind," Hawksley warned. "You're the lad they seem to be gunning for—and you're going into a spot where you're not going to be getting much help. Watch every move you make. They will."

CHAPTER ❖ EIGHT

IT DIDN'T HELP Ward's mood any to notice the silent hostility of the town folks when he rode out. It made him realize that the mysterious threat which hung over him must be something carefully planned. The valley rumors had sounded so ridiculous, particularly the part about his interference with the flow of the creek, that he had not thought too much about them, concentrating on the more apparent dangers. Now he had to recognize that somebody had planned a careful campaign. The settlers were being turned into hostile witnesses to whatever it was that was supposed to happen. Ward and the Hawksleys would have to fight it out alone, not even knowing who the enemy really was.

The sun was well above the eastern mountains by the time he hit the trail up the creek but time would not worry him. He could reach the mountain canyons a little after noon and have the afternoon hours to get some questions answered. With that in mind he rode carefully, trying to favor the lame leg and finding to his satisfaction that it was reasonably comfortable. Rest had done wonders for it.

Two hours later he caught a glimpse of movement ahead and promptly cut toward the cover of the line of cottonwoods which fringed the creek. In this business he had to expect every stranger to be an enemy so he didn't propose to be caught off guard. Again old habit took charge and he scouted the valley ahead of him with all of the guile he had learned so long ago, presently locating the spot where he had seen the suspicious moves. It was no great satisfaction for him to discover that just ahead of him were two riders who ap-

peared to be waiting for him. Burnside and Perrine had taken their position at a bend of the creek where the trail came close to the water. He watched them from cover until he was sure that they were not serving as any kind of decoys, then he pushed on toward them. The fact that they were staying out in the open suggested that they didn't have any evil intentions for the moment.

The pair held their position as he approached, neither one making any kind of hostile move. They looked serious but not particularly ominous even though both showed a certain redness of eye which seemed significant to Ward. On a hunch he greeted them with a show of ironic good humor.

"Morning, gents. Nice of you to meet me here like this. And kind of a surprise, seeing as how you must be tired after your night's work."

Burnside's sharp black eyes wavered for just an instant but then the animal cunning took over. "So yuh heard we was out ridin' patrol, hey?"

"No. I simply heard that you rode out last night. I also heard that other people were riding last night."

"Now yuh're hurtin' us, Captain Ward," the little man retorted, matching the tone of sarcasm. "Here we go and jine up with them boys across the creek to help guard the valley folks against trouble and you make it sound like we been doin' somethin' wrong! Plumb humiliatin', it is."

Perrine laughed aloud, obviously pleased with his partner's quick wit and humor. Ward didn't need the laugh to know that he was being challenged. Burnside was letting him know that this was the story he expected to use—and he didn't much care whether or not it would be accepted. Obviously the little man was feeling pretty cocky about the whole thing.

"A shame," Ward agreed solemnly. "But I just can't help being of a suspicious nature where you two are concerned."

"No need to be. A man ought to do his duty. We're figurin' we might even organize a Vigilance Committee to see that folks around here get their rights."

"Careful," Ward told him. "Vigilantes sometimes get out of hand. They might even start cleaning up some of their public-spirited leaders."

"Forget it. We'll stop beatin' around the bush. You know and we know that this treasure yarn ain't what it was cracked up to be. But somehow there's a lot of new smoke goin' up.

You've got somethin' under yore hat with this fancy land deal and big talk about a mill dam. We think some other folks have got ideas too. We also have some purty good ideas about what somebody is plannin' to do about all the fuss."

"Who's been feeding you this latest fairy tale? Ortega? You're a pair of stupid suckers if you believe anything he tries to sell you."

"Don't try to throw us off, damn it! We know somethin'."

Perrine had to get into the talk. "And we know somebody what knows a heap more. Jest don't try to buck our play if'n yuh know what's good for yuh."

Ward shook his head, electing to be completely serious for the moment. "I suppose you won't believe me but I'm telling you straight that I'm not in the treasure-hunting business any longer. I don't believe there ever was any gold hidden in this valley. My mill operation is exactly what I've told everyone it is. No more."

"Rats!" Burnside snapped. "You ain't missin' a trick. So don't try to feed us none o' that tripe!"

"You'd rather get your tripe from Ortega, I suppose. Well, don't forget that he never lived in this valley. He doesn't know a thing about it."

Burnside shook his head. "Mebbe we ain't puttin' much stock in the Mex. Mebbe we got a line on somethin' better."

Ward let it go at that. At least he had gotten a partial admission that the pair were involved with Ortega. Not to mention a real hint that they had some ideas about Henninger. "Now why did you boys go out of your way to stop me and tell me all this?" he asked. "We've never been what you might call real close friends. What are you getting at?"

"Simple enough. We got a new line on the Maximilian treasure. Maybe it's better than anybody ever had before. We figure yuh're onto the same deal. If it leaks out, we got troubles. What's wrong with just us makin' a deal so as not to git too many others in on it?"

"What's wrong is that I wouldn't trust you with any kind of deal. You know that."

"Sure enough. And we ain't wastin' no endearin' terms on you, neither. But we wasn't figgerin' to git real cozy no-how. All we want is that both sides keep their traps shut. Yuh kin play it anyway yuh want. We'll do the same. But we don't talk. Right?"

"Then you're not cutting Ortega in?"

"Why should we? He ain't plannin' on anything fer us."

"Then how come you threw in with him?"

"Hellsfire, Owen! If'n yuh ain't got that figgered out yet I'll be damned if I'm goin' to tell yuh."

"Too bad. Just when we were planning to be partners. You disappoint me, Brother Burnside."

"Stop the damned yappin'. Is it a deal or ain't it? About keeping shut, I mean."

"A deal, if you call it that. I won't give anybody else any help in hunting for the Maximilian treasure. That good enough for you?"

"Right. Wanta shake on it?"

Ward laughed. "No. We're not trying to fool each other. Remember?" Then he added quickly, his quick glance having seen the three men who had ridden out of the timber beyond the brook, "Anyway, it might not look good to your new friends. You don't want Ortega to think you're throwing in with me, do you?"

He could see the worried frown appear on both faces as Perrine and Burnside turned to stare. Then he looked around to study the trio who had halted beyond the creek. All were dressed in black and one of them was notable for the flash of silver ornaments on his garb. Vaqueros frequently preferred black garb but now Ward thought of the significance. The Dark Raiders.

"Better get over there and join them," he said in a low voice. "You can act real ornery, if you figure they'll like it. I won't mind."

"Don't be so damned smart!" Perrine growled. "I reckon we'll do whatever we wanta do around here."

Burnside said something to him in an undertone and backed his horse away, turning slowly toward the creek as though watching Ward for a false move. His burly partner followed a bit more clumsily and Ward watched them with grim amusement as they splashed through the shallows to join the three Mexicans. It would be interesting to hear the conversation that would take place over there on the other side of the stream. It might be profitable as well as amusing. Any time the enemy started wrangling among themselves there was a hope of some possible gain.

It cheered him a little as he resumed his journey, the five

men having disappeared back into the woods. Burnside would have some explaining to do now. Too bad that Ward couldn't hear a few explanations of another kind.

He was still feeling reasonably pleased with the morning when he saw the Henninger wagon under a clump of trees along the slope of the mountain. Here at the north end of the valley the flat country gave way quite abruptly to a series of knobby hills that were really extensions of the more northerly mountains. The shoulder of rock beneath which the Henningers had camped was the bit of high ground which separated the two canyons that had been so much a part of the oft-told treasure yarn. Even without specific directions the Henningers had come to the center of the legend.

Ward was within a hundred rods of the spot when he saw something move on the mountain. Concentrating on the spot he picked up the outline of a man up there. The fellow was partly screened by the pines but Ward could see enough of him to know that it was not an Indian. The Henningers were already under surveillance.

Then he noticed something else. Their team was hitched and the little man seemed to be packing in the last duffle which must have been used around the camp. Ward drifted on toward them, wondering what the next move was going to be.

Somewhat to his surprise he found himself welcomed with some show of cordiality. At least the man was cordial. Marion Henninger simply nodded without speaking, waiting on the seat of the wagon as though for a signal to start moving.

"You seem fit, Mr. Ward," Henninger observed. "We scarcely expected you to be doing any riding so soon."

"I'm tough." Ward told him with a wry grin. "How's the geology business? Found anything interesting?"

"Not here. We stopped here last night to scout the country a little. These canyons on either side of us appear to be far more interesting possibilities for my researches."

Ward let the grin come again but he was watching the little man's expression as he said, "Plenty of searching in both of them during the past few years. Searching and researching, you might say. Treasure hunters have combed both."

Henninger tried to look surprised and didn't make a very good job of it. "You mean these gulches are the scene of that treasure legend you mentioned the other day?"

"Exactly. That's Embrujada Gulch off there to the west a little. Just around the bend where the creek comes out is Tortuga Canyon. Interesting names, don't you think?"

"Very. Bewitched Gulch and Turtle Canyon. Both are rather significant terms where treasure legends are concerned."

"Everything seems significant in treasure yarns," Ward told him idly. "Which one were you planning to try first?"

"We hadn't quite decided. Maybe you could advise us as to which one has the best—geologic formations." The hesitation was almost imperceptible but Ward was watching for it, already certain that he could read a part of what was running through the little man's mind.

"I recommend Tortuga," he said casually, pointing toward the bend of the creek. "That's the one I'm figuring to dam. My sawmill is up there. If you want to come along I can show you the way and after you've worked from a base in the canyon you can move over into the other one. They almost come together back against the mountain."

Henninger glanced at his daughter but drew no sign in return. Then he nodded quickly. "We'll accept the advice, sir. And thank you for the good will."

"Let's go," Ward said briefly. "It's not far to the mill."

He rode along beside the wagon as they swung around to follow the creek into the almost hidden canyon. Ward decided to play it easy, hoping to get some hint as to how much of the treasure story Henninger had swallowed. "Nice piece of country up here," he observed quietly. "We bought it along with a lot of valley acreage from the old Ortega estate. Ben's trying to build up a settlement and sell land. I took over this mountainside of timber and the chance of doing something with the water power that has been going to waste. So far we've been sawing lumber with an old teakettle of a steam engine but in another year we ought to be making real progress." He laughed aloud as he added, "Maybe that's what the real treasure of the place will turn out to be."

He didn't get any response from Professor Henninger but he did from the girl. "It may turn out to be awkward treasure," she told him. "There was a lot of troubled talk in the village about your taking water rights away from the farmers."

"They'll understand, I hope, when they see what it will mean. Every year they have spring floods to ruin their fields

and then in late summer the creek doesn't carry enough water to take care of their cattle. I plan to impound enough water to run my mill. I'll be releasing it during the summer when the farmers need it, impounding it when it will provide flood control."

"You make it sound reasonable enough."

"Because it *is* reasonable. When the farmers of the valley get done with listening to wild talk they'll see it my way."

They were silent then as the trail followed a sweep of the creek to plunge straight in between rock walls. As they entered the gap the walls grew higher on each side with the natural slope of the mountain and presently they were moving along between seventy-foot rock barriers, only the fringe of trees on both rims reminding them that they were cutting into a piece of mountain. Professor Henninger seemed delighted, his avid glance taking in the strata of sandstone and his silence giving way to exclamations of interest at what he saw.

Then the passage ended abruptly after a sharp climb and they moved out into a small valley which had another gorge beyond it. Ward's glance went promptly to the cluster of shacks and corrals which lay beneath the far cliff near the mouth of the other canyon. Two cabins and a storage shed stood close to the stream, while back in the curve of the valley were the corrals. A hundred yards closer to the valley center a sawmill poured black smoke from a sheet iron stack. Two men worked at the mill and the whine of the saw came faintly to the travelers. Behind the mill two other men stacked lumber on a big open wagon. Ward grinned at the sight. Apparently Joe Beech and Jack Nye had made a fast trip back from the pass with the salvaged supplies and pipe fittings so McCready had put them to work. Mac was like that; when he wasn't having to tinker with his ancient engine he could get a lot of work done.

In spite of his worries and physical aches Ward could still get a lot of satisfaction out of watching the way McCready and his smaller helper were running the mill. Sandy Kirk took care of moving the logs into place but Mac was doing the rest of it, slicing the big pine trunks into planks as deftly as a housewife might slice apples. He always managed to run out good lumber; Ward hoped they would have a market for it.

"There has been a fire over there at the edge of the clearing," Marion Henninger said abruptly.

Ward stared in the direction she indicated, a little annoyed that someone else should have noticed it first. After all, he was the one who was supposed to have a reputation as a sharp observer. "Sharp eyes," he commented. "We had a shed there when I left. One of those Dark Raider jobs, I suppose."

"I've heard that name several times," the girl said quickly. "What does it mean?"

"At the moment I'm not sure. But trouble is part of it. And I might warn you that somebody was watching you from the mountain when I came up the creek trail. Don't get careless while you're wandering around in these hills."

She started to ask for further explanations but was interrupted by a yell from the sawmill. Kirk had spotted the newcomers and there was a lively exchange of shouts. Then Mac shut the mill down and the four-man crew turned out to greet the arrivals. Beech and Nye had already met the Henningers and it seemed pretty certain that they had already informed the others that Marion was a pretty girl. Somewhat to Ward's astonishment, she seemed to enjoy the fuss they were making over her.

There was a rapid exchange of questions and answers as each party tried to learn what had been happening to the other. The fittings and other property had been recovered without trouble but Nye and Beech had seen several riders in the timber as they came down from the pass. They hadn't been close enough to identify them or to get any idea as to what they were doing but it was a bit ominous that they should be up there. Ward made sure that the point was stressed properly. He wanted the Henningers to realize that they were moving into what might prove to be real trouble.

CHAPTER ❧ NINE

MCCREADY BROKE UP the talk. "Back to work, you polecats!" he rasped. "Got to get what we can outa that—blasted old teakettle before she falls apart. Then we'll make proper repairs." He grinned at Marion Henninger as though to apologize for what he had almost said. "Sorry, Ma'am, but I can't have these jiggers standin' around to stare at a purty woman. Work to be done."

The girl aimed a tiny smile at Ward as the other men turned away. "I wonder what he really intended to call that engine before he remembered that I was here?"

"Something pretty ripe, you can be sure. Now, how about the pair of you making camp here tonight? Tomorrow you can move on up the canyon and find a place to set up field headquarters."

"I'm tempted," Marion said, the smile still showing. "Mr. McCready actually paid me a compliment. That doesn't happen often."

"Some day when we're not snarling at each other I'll try to pass one along. Sorry I didn't know that you liked them."

"Any woman . . ."

Her father broke in at that point. "We'll keep right on up the creek, Mr. Ward. There's plenty of daylight left and I'd like to locate a camp site as soon as possible."

Ward started to argue but then thought better of it. "By the look of this place you might be safer to be somewhere else. But let me warn you that your camp last night was watched and that you'll probably be under surveillance most of the time. Keep it in mind."

"We'll remember. Do you recommend any particular spot upstream?"

"Good spot about a mile above here. Once you've climbed out of this little valley you'll find a good trail where our wagons have gone through. Follow it along the creek and you'll have mostly a solid rock ledge to travel on. Just beyond a big bend you'll find a broad place with firewood and shelter beneath the east side cliff."

"Thank you, sir. We'll be on our way. Already I can see formations in this rock which make me feel that I may be right, that this is really a sort of transition area between the granite and sandstone country of the Sangre de Cristo and the alkali flats of the land south of here. With these canyons to show me the lines of cleavage and possible faults I may be able to trace what I hope to trace."

Maximilian's treasure, Ward thought. But he didn't say so. He simply waved a farewell, mildly pleased that Marion Henninger was still smiling. At least that was some improvement. They had not separated on very good terms in earlier meetings.

He watched them climb up along the rapids of the canyon creek and then he limped toward the work that had been done at the mouth of the upper canyon. The main frames of the dam and spillway were in place, a reasonably substantial amount of rock fill having been added to buttress the timbers. Evidently McCready and Kirk had spent a lot of time here, probably with the sawmill tied up for repairs. With any luck they wouldn't need the battered old engine after this summer. In another season their water power project ought to be in operation.

He caught himself up in the thought, realizing how many threats to that goal had developed. Somebody was trying hard to interfere with something—and maybe this was the center of attention. When the upper gorge became a reservoir for the dam it would flood the part of the canyon that had been the focal point of almost every treasure hunt in the past. Maybe somebody really did believe that the Maximilian loot was still there. Maybe somebody had dug up a new bit of information. Perhaps Henninger had become the key man now—and the Ortega outfit wanted to show them something. It seemed a little far-fetched as he thought about it, the flooding of the valley being many months in the future and no

immediate threat to any search of the place, but it was no wilder a guess than some of the others that had been going through his mind.

It was while he was being a trifle sorry for himself that the rifle slug whined just over his shoulder, so close to his ear that it could almost be felt. Above the gurgle of the creek he caught a distant splat of sound and finally made out the tiny puff of white up among the trees on the west ridge. By that time he was doing his locating from the cover of some rocks, wondering whether the distant sniper would try again. It seemed pretty significant that the bushwhack shot had come from the same tongue of high ground on which someone had been spying on the Henningers. Same man, no doubt. Was it possible that he had taken a shot at Ward simply because Ward had talked to the Henningers? Again it seemed a little too ridiculous—but in this mess anything had to be considered.

He waited several minutes before leaving his rock cover, aware that the noise of the sawmill had kept the others from realizing his situation. He limped hastily toward the fringe of brush along the stream but no second shot came. The sniper on the ridge must have retreated after that one attempt.

It still didn't make much sense. If Ortega—or anyone else—was trying to ruin the property value of the valley these personal attacks didn't sound like good strategy. Ward decided that he hadn't interpreted the facts correctly as yet. Too many things simply didn't add up right.

McCready swore luridly when he heard about the sniping. "Why in hell didn't yuh holler?" he demanded. "We coulda druv him off. Maybe he's still up there an here yuh are, right smack out in the goddam open and . . ."

"He's gone," Ward said shortly. "What we need to do is prepare for the next move. There's less than an hour of good daylight left so call off the work for now and we'll make a few moves of our own. We don't know whether this mysterious enemy is aiming mostly at me or mostly at the Henningers so I want a couple men to go up there tonight and stay with them. Joe and Jack had better take the job. Shift off and make sure that somebody is awake all night. We'll do the same thing down here."

"Yuh think this Mex is at the bottom of it, Owen?"

"It seems likely."

"Then let's go get the bastard. I've had about a good bellyfull of this raidin' business. We'll see how they like a dose of their own medicine!"

"Not yet. I'm still making guesses and they're pretty wild ones. I've got a feeling that they're getting a mite anxious for some reason. They had a try at the Henningers in the pass. They watched them up here. They've had two cracks at me—maybe three. They'll try again, maybe tonight."

He swung around to issue his orders to Joe Beech and Jack Nye. "Tell the Henningers what happened here. Remind 'em that they've been under surveillance since they came up through the valley. Scare 'em a bit if they seem to need scaring but make sure that they don't get careless. Try to see to it that their camp for the night is not open to any sneak attack."

Nye wrinkled his nose and winked. "Kinda slippin', ain't ye, Owen? Purty gal needs a helpin' hand and ye're sendin' a couple o' ole varmints like me and Joe to handle the chore. 'Tain't reasonable."

"Beat it! Take rifles and ammunition as well as your regular six-guns. Don't hesitate to shoot for keeps. Maybe we can spike some of this Dark Raider talk if we can show folks who's stirring it up."

He watched them saddle up and leave the sawmill camp, meanwhile planning possible defenses of the camp itself. Kirk broke out some cold rations which took care of the supper problem and then Ward outlined his plan for the night.

"We'll set up defenses around the shed or the lumber piles if we have a choice. However, picket duty ought to be out in the open where we can listen in all directions. We'll be vulnerable to any real assault no matter how we plan it but I don't believe we need to expect the kind of attack we can't handle."

"I'd still like to move in on that Ortega jigger," McCready grumbled. "If he's back o' this mess it's time we smoked him out."

"Can be we'll do better to let him smoke himself out. Right now we can't prove a thing on him and we don't know why he's doing it—if he is doing it."

"So we just keep fightin' 'em off?"

"For a while yet. I want to know a few things. Just make sure your guns are ready for use."

Neither man questioned his conclusions or his orders. Partly that was because he was Owen Ward. This sort of thing was his business. He was an expert at it and they were willing to accept his authority in such matters. The fact that he was their employer was not important.

He spotted them between the cabin and the sawmill, picking an open spot which still provided a little cover. "You get some sleep. I'll take the first watch since I'm not likely to be as sleepy as men who've done a hard day's work. I'll be over there between those last two piles of lumber. It'll keep me clear of the buildings and give me a chance to listen in the proper directions."

McCready chuckled. "And put yuh close to the mule corrals. I know that's one o' yer pet stunts."

"Right. A mule is a better sentry than a man. I'm depending on them to cover my left flank." He made a joke of it but they knew that he was being quite serious. On more than one occasion it had been mules that had given the alarm when sentries had not caught the small noises of skulking Indians. "Just remember where I am if the shooting starts."

Quiet settled gradually over the little valley, animals ceasing their nervous pawing as the supper fire's embers slowly blackened. Ward made himself as comfortable as possible between the two outside stacks of freshly sawed lumber. Directly in front was the forest rim of the valley, thinned by earlier cutting but with a second growth that would make silent movement difficult. To his right he could see the wedge of sky where the canyon opened out to the south. Any attack would likely come from the south, either directly or by a small detour through the edge of the timber.

Then the tedious waiting began. For an hour or so there was only the occasional stamp of a hoof or the sound of insects. Ward found himself thinking about how many insects it must require for each little separate chirp to become such a steady drone. It was easier to let his mind dwell on a foolish matter like that rather than to fret about the big problem at hand.

Presently a night breeze began to come up the canyon, a faint tang of woodsmoke from the almost dead embers mingling with the resinous scent of the fresh-cut planks. It seemed so peaceful that Ward could almost forget the sniper of the afternoon. Almost.

He forgot the crickets instead, his mind swinging back to

the guesses he had been making. Every reasonable conclusion suggested that any attack on the sawmill camp would have to be made around midnight. As yet the enemy was not risking an open show of force. The men who might attack this spot had to be well clear of the place before daybreak. Hence the attack would come early. It almost had to be that way.

Two hours slipped past but Ward did not let that awaken his relief. He wouldn't sleep anyway; let the others get their rest. It occurred to him that he had never asked where the dynamite had been stored. Bad thinking on his part.

While he was thinking about his foolishness he heard the first uneasy snorts of the mules in the lower corral. Several of the long-eared animals were annoyed over something. It might be a panther but Ward didn't think so. When a man has campaigned with mules he gets to know their moods.

The uneasy grumbling of the mules lasted for a long time but still Ward could hear no other movement around the camp. He held his position at the corner of the lumber pile, unwilling to wake his comrades for a false alarm. It would be worth a lot more to see what kind of tactics the enemy proposed.

Then he began to hear movements. Somebody was working through the second growth out beyond the corrals. There was another whisper of sound in the brush somewhere up behind the cabins and still another opposite the sawmill. Men were taking up positions there, probably readying themselves for an attack at several points. As soon as he was sure of it he began to inch his way back toward the spot where McCready and Beech slept.

Both men awakened quickly and without even a grunt. Ward whispered his information swiftly and the three of them bellied down in a little low place where they could cover most of the camp's border.

"Don't shoot unless I do," he warned. "This could get interesting."

They had only another three or four minutes to wait. Then a sudden clatter sounded from just south of the sawmill. A horse had broken into a quick run from a standing start—headed straight up into the camp.

"Steady," Ward cautioned, his voice sharp but still a whisper.

"Another damned fire raid!" McCready growled.

They could see the flash of light from behind the last lumber pile and almost immediately the flash became a crouching horseman carrying a pile of something that was just beginning to blaze.

He came straight in among the lumber piles but made no attempt to drop his burden. Nor was there anyone else with him. The sight of a lone rider making the attack was something of a surprise and for a moment they could only stare in wonderment. Then Ward realized what it meant.

The rider swung as he passed the last stack of planks, heaving his now fiery burden to one side by the bit of rope which held it. Then he bolted for the cover of the brush.

"Don't shoot!" Ward snapped. "Let him . . ."

The order was a fraction of a second late. McCready had not been able to restrain himself at sight of the raider getting away unscathed. He slammed in a pair of hastily aimed shots, one of them appearing to score a hit but without stopping the fellow's flight.

"Stay flat!" Ward's voice was even sharper now. "That's what they wanted."

Slugs began to whine over their heads immediately, some of them high enough to sing on out into the canyon but others setting up a medley of vicious tunes as they flattened on rocks to ricochet off into the night. He didn't need to explain now. The enemy had put men into sniping positions and had then sent a single rider to drop blazing straw that would illuminate the camp for the snipers. This was no fire raid like the previous ones; this time the raiders were out to get somebody.

Ward recalled the old yarn he'd heard about the fellow who was about to be hanged and who said that if it wasn't for the honor of the occasion he'd just as soon not go through with it. Now he was in something of the same position. He was too prominent for comfort.

It brought a grim chuckle and Mac growled, "What's so damned funny?"

"Shut up and lie low," Ward ordered. "Let that stuff burn out."

He was glad they had picked such a sheltered spot. Out in the open or among the lumber stacks they'd have been easy targets. Down here in the hollow they had a good chance.

McCready was cursing steadily, anxious to return the

shots, but Ward remained firm. "Let the fire burn down," he insisted. "Maybe they'll get a bit desperate."

"Why in hell should they? They've got everything their own way."

"Not where it counts. They want a crack at me and they're not getting it. Hold your fire!"

Slugs continued to smash all around them, the crossfire vicious but without effect. Even when the blaze died the firing continued, wilder now but with a sort of frantic desperation.

"Now get ready," Ward said shortly. "They may try to rush us."

There was another minute or two of waiting but then a voice shouted from down the creek. The words were in Spanish but Ward knew the language well enough to understand. "Aim at any movement," he ordered. "The riflemen are being called off." He rolled clear of the hollow and steadied himself to fire.

It was a gesture and no more. The darkness following the blaze of light had left everyone blind and the half dozen shots were aimed at nothing in particular. Running footsteps could be heard while farther back in the timber a horse clattered on the rocks, evidently the one which had borne the firebrands into the camp. The raiders were pulling out.

"Let's get 'em!" McCready yelled. "Down the crick."

"No." Ward's command was a sharp one. "We're not going to get anywhere by playing into their hands. We can wait. They can't."

He stilled McCready's grumbling with a brief explanation. "Counterattacks are no good when that's what the enemy wants. Give me a chance to backtrack these fellows when it gets light. It'll make more sense."

"I found out one thing," McCready grumbled. "I can't shoot fer sour apples! I had that polecat fair in my sights—with decent light. Fust time I squeeze too hard on the damned trigger and the next time I got in a hell of a big hurry. Only nicked him."

Ward chuckled at the burly man's obvious disgust. "Just as well. It made them show their hand. Now you know I wasn't dreaming about somebody being out to get me. This wasn't any fire raid."

"What are yuh plannin' to do about it?"

"Nothing—tonight. They won't be back just yet. At day-break Joe can hustle up the canyon and get Kirk and Nye started back. I think the Henningers will be in no danger. Get a load of lumber moving toward town. They can take a message. That's Joe and Nye, of course. Kirk stays on here. I'll do some tracking as soon as there's enough light."

"What message?" Beech asked.

"Tell Doc to be on the lookout for a wounded man. And have Ben do a bit of talking with old Salazar. Tell him to get the real details on how Salazar located Pablo Ortega."

"What's the idea?" McCready wanted to know.

"I'll tell you later. Maybe I've got a hunch—or maybe this is just wild guessing."

He slept in snatches for the rest of the night, his mind too active for real rest. Still he felt reasonably fit when he started out at dawn, Joe Beech already on his way up the canyon to carry out the rest of the day's program. The leg was stiff but he could use it well enough, particularly since he didn't expect to throw any particular strain on it.

A little attention to the signs on the fringes of the camp told him the full story. Men blundering around in the darkness always left plenty of trace behind them and he could read it without trouble. Five men had come up the valley, three of them moving into sniping position while the fire-brand carrier remained with the horseholder until time for his move. It was just as he might have guessed.

The line of retreat was equally easy. The attackers had fallen back to their horses and had ridden hastily down the creek, making no attempt to hide their tracks. In most places he could see that they had backtracked their incoming trail and he was not surprised when both lines of prints pointed straight toward the Ortega lands. Probably the attack had been launched from that line camp which seemed to be the principal Ortega outpost, the one which Ortega had reported earlier as having suffered an attack. Ward had no doubt that the report was false, having been calculated to increase valley tension and throw suspicion away from the guilty parties.

He went far enough to feel certain of his conclusions even though he still could not see the connection between the Dark Raider assaults and these more deadly attempts upon his life. For the moment he simply had to assume that such a connection existed.

CHAPTER ❖ TEN

WHEN WARD TURNED BACK he was just in time to meet Nye and Beech coming out of the canyon with their load of lumber. He paused long enough to make sure that Joe had his orders straight and to add the information that the night raiders had probably been Ortega men. Then he moved back into Tortuga Canyon.

He found McCready and Kirk working away as though nothing had happened so he stopped to report his findings. "Keep alert," he warned. "I don't think they'll make any quick moves but we won't take chances. I'm riding up to the Henningers' while things are quiet. Maybe I can talk them into moving out before things get bad."

"Better let 'em alone," McCready growled. "The gal's purty, all right, but that canyon's a mighty bad place fer a feller what's had somebody takin' bushwhack shots at him."

"I'll be careful, Grandpa," Ward told him meekly. "See that you do the same. This camp is not what you'd call a safe spot."

Behind him he heard Kirk's thick Scottish brogue suggest, "We'd better get on with the sawin'—Grandpa. He'll nae take your advice."

McCready swore and Ward grinned as he turned away. Kirk didn't talk much but he had a remarkable knack of infuriating McCready. That Grandpa bit would keep them in a wrangle all day. And they seemed to work better when they were snapping at each other.

He found the canyon cool after the morning heat of the lower valley and for a short distance he almost enjoyed the ride. Marion Henninger came into view around a bend of the canyon. She was in real camp garb once more, levis and

a tan flannel shirt somehow quite becoming to her, particularly since there was no bonnet to keep an occasional ray of sunshine from doing pleasant things to her pale hair. She greeted him seriously enough, asking about the night attack.

He outlined the affair to her but she didn't seem to be paying much attention to his reply, scarcely letting him finish before she broached the subject which he guessed had really brought her down the creek. "I want to know what these hints about a treasure story mean. I don't like the way my father is acting and I couldn't help recalling the number of times you have passed remarks about people like us hunting treasure."

He pulled a crooked grin as he faced her squarely. "Oddly enough, I came up here this morning to put the matter to him rather bluntly. I think he's asking for trouble and I hoped I might make him see it my way."

"Your way?"

"I don't believe there is a treasure here. But other people do. People who might kill to prevent another from finding it. I'm afraid he's risking his life—and yours—for no reason."

She gestured toward a clump of straggling pines which filled a cleft in the canyon wall. "Could we sit over there in the shade while you tell me about it? I'd like to know what you think of the situation before I go back to face my father."

He helped her from the saddle, once more aware that he was getting a real pleasure out of being near her. Then he forced his mind to the necessities of the moment, making sure that the horses were out of sight of either rim and that both himself and the girl were screened by the pines from possible sniper fire. When they were seated comfortably on a patch of grass he asked abruptly, "How much do you know about the Maximilian treasure?"

"I know there is a legend. No more."

"Do you believe the yarn?"

"I never gave it any thought. You may recall—or you may not—that I came out here to study native legends. I feel that there are volumes of folklore and the like waiting to be written, perhaps some of these tales connected with the treasure tales that have been current since the day of the Conquistadores." She laughed shortly as she added, "But it's not very important what I believe. The important matter is that you think that my father has swallowed this tale."

"The important matter is that a lot of things seem to be happening which apparently are due to the fact that some-

body else thinks your father has gone into the treasure-hunting business. That's where the danger lies."

"Could I hear the whole story, please? I think I should, you know."

Ward didn't mind. To have a pretty girl asking him to tell her a yarn he always enjoyed telling—even to people who weren't pretty—was a real nice way to have the day working out.

"Suppose I take it right from the beginning," he proposed. "Which is down in Mexico, the story itself not properly belonging to the mountain country at all. It seems that when the puppet-Emperor Maximilian was captured by the Juarez forces he managed to get his personal plunder shipped out in time to keep it from being captured by the victorious patriots. Trusted agents loaded a large quantity of gold coins and valuable plate on a string of mules and headed north across the Rio Grande, aiming for the Texas coast and a ship to Europe.

"They ducked the Juarez troops but just after passing Presidio del Norte they met some Confederate soldiers who were hiding out from the Union's occupation forces. These ex-Rebs—who must have been outlaws or they would not have had any good reason to be hiding at that late date—managed to get themselves hired as extra guards for the treasure train. Then they murdered the entire company of Europeans during a night camp somewhere in the vicinity of Castle Gap. Up to this point the various versions of the story are in substantial agreement. Maybe they're even true."

She nodded soberly. "Usually there is some grain of truth behind these legends. I've noticed . . ." She broke off with another of those little laughs Ward was learning to like. "Now I'm talking like a researcher again! Please go on."

"Well, at this point the variations begin. The most frequently repeated version is that the murderers buried the treasure near the scene of the massacre, separating to let the possible uproar die down. There were six of them and, as it always seems to happen in the lost treasure stories, they were never able to join together again. Which makes for six different stories, each one to account for the efforts of each thug to recover the loot."

"Where is Castle Gap?" Marion interrupted. "It was not mentioned in the account I read. Or else I don't recall it."

"Down in Texas. Not far northeast of Presidio. Plenty of people have searched that area, some of them on tips that were

supposed to have come from members of the outlaw crew. But we're not interested in any of the five basic stories that deal with the Texas part of the yarn. We can concentrate on the one about the fellow who recovered the plunder and brought it up the Pecos."

"Now I'm on strange ground. This part I'm sure I've never heard."

"One of the bandits was supposed to have come from this part of the country. He hid up here with some Mexican villagers while he waited to go back and pick up the treasure. While he was here he made friends with a half-wit boy who went back with him as a helper when he headed for Texas. They took four burros and recovered enough of the plunder to make heavy burdens for the animals. Coins and valuable plate, the story tells it. Then they headed straight up the Pecos to a spot east of Santa Fe and thence northwest into these mountains."

She smiled—prettily, Ward thought. "You sound pretty serious now."

"Once I was a pretty serious believer. Along with some other treasure hunters I worked out the clues to make myself believe that this was the valley where the bandit and his half-wit friend came to hide the loot a second time. All versions of the tale agreed that they made a map of the place but then the variations of the variation begin. One yarn says they left the map with an old woman in the half-wit's village. Another has them leaving it with the local *padre*. Another tale says the woman who got the map was not old but was the sweetheart of the bandit. In another she's the mother of the half-wit. Anyway, the two treasure hunters then headed back toward Castle Gap for another load of plunder. There they were killed by other treasure seekers, either of the original band or otherwise, again depending on which tale you prefer to believe. There's even a tale that the killers included the James boys—who actually were working around in this part of the country at the time. The big item is that the bandit and his helper were killed."

"Same pattern as all the other treasure stories," she said quietly. "The only people who really know the location of the treasure are always dead. Thus we always have a beautiful blank wall for the treasure hunters to butt their heads against."

"But always with a hint that there is an opening in that wall," he reminded her. "In this instance, the old woman or

the priest or the sweetheart who had the map. Along with a lot of other men I tried to find them. It seemed like a good possibility, you know. Unlike so many treasure stories this one is not so ancient that all the characters had to be dead. I really tried."

"With any success at all?"

"None. I quickly became certain that this had to be the valley. No other valley northwest of the Pecos fitted the common description in all the tales. I never found a map. I never found anyone who had seen such a map. Several Mexicans claimed they had known the parties concerned but they disagreed on so many points that I finally decided all of them were lying to get attention. I lived and ate with the local peons until the frioles stuck out of my ears but in the end I couldn't do any more than pinpoint this valley as the valley of the legend. It has the hacienda and the two canyons which are mentioned in every version of the yarn. I searched these two canyons until I knew every rock in both of them. I even found the sign of the turtle."

"Sign of the turtle?" she echoed with a show of interest. "That bit of symbolism sounds familiar. I've run across it in many treasure stories, particularly those dealing with the Caribbean."

"You know what it means?"

"Of course." She was laughing as she put on a show of great dignity. "I'm supposed to be an expert in this sort of thing, you'll please remember."

"What does it mean to the experts?"

She sensed that he was serious with the question and her reply was in the same vein. "Two things possible. The burial place of the plunder or a sign of death."

"The sign of death often being to warn trespassers against meddling with the treasure cache."

"Correct. And you found such a sign?"

"I found two of them. One is scratched on the canyon wall just this side of our sawmill site. The other is a cluster of rocks which form a turtle sign only when seen from the canyon rim. It can't be too far from where you made camp last night. I worked on both of them for a long time. No dice."

"But what do they mean?"

He shrugged. "My considered belief is that they mean nothing. The one down the gorge is the work of some earlier treasure hunter who hoped to confuse rivals. The other is simply a freak formation. Actually I can't imagine the ex-

rebel or his idiot chum being so well versed on treasure lore. I did a lot of hunting before I was willing to admit that fact. Now I'm convinced."

"And that's the story?"

"Not quite. Many primitive people have superstitions about divine protectors for the insane and the stupid. In this case there was a special detail of spooks supposed to be the guardians of the half-wit. The Dark Raiders. They must have been assigned only to this particular valley because they surely didn't keep the lad from getting himself killed at Castle Gap. Now they are supposed to range the area, protecting his loot from us treasure hunters."

"The usual pattern once more," she agreed. "Plenty of these not so benevolent spirits in such lengends."

"This gang definitely fits that 'not so benevolent' tag. They're supposed to kill anyone who threatens the boy's plunder. Whenever the treasure is in danger the Dark Raiders are supposed to start rampaging around the valley."

"Did they bother you when you were searching?"

"No."

"But they are on the prowl now?"

"So it would seem. Please remember that at least four men have died mysteriously while searching for this treasure. My guess is that they were killed by rivals, at least two of them by your friend Hellsfire Burnside. My other guess is that somebody has revived the Dark Raiders story to cover something that has nothing whatever to do with the Maximilian treasure."

She stared off across the canyon as though considering it all carefully. "I think you're right in assuming that my father has gone treasure hunting. I imagine he ran across the story in some of his preliminary work. I'm surprised that he has let it divert him from his true purpose but that's neither here nor there. He's doing it and he's in danger."

"You're both in danger."

She faced him with a small quirk of a smile on her lips. "After what has been happening to you I'm surprised that you think of us. You've been much more a subject of attack than we have."

"But I'm on guard."

"I suppose so. But I still don't see why we should be in particular danger if this Dark Raider story is merely being used as a cloak for something not connected with treasure hunting."

"I don't understand it either but I think you ought to move to some safer place until we get to the bottom of this mess."

"You're right, of course. Will you go with me and put it to father just as you've outlined it to me?"

"That's what I was aiming to do when I rode up this way." He tried on a smile of his own as he added, "Not that it hasn't been nice having it work out the way it did."

She smiled again as she stood up. "Somehow you have changed, Mr. Ward. Now you sound almost gallant—which is substantially different from the way you sounded on some of our earlier meetings."

"Maybe my audience isn't quite so critical."

"Forgive me. I was resentful—and I simply didn't understand. I hope you will forgive me and forget that I ever talked as I did."

"You're forgiven—if I am. We were both pretty rough on each other, but it was kinda fun to fight with you at that."

"I'm glad you enjoyed it." She sounded almost stiff again.

"Whoa! Don't take it like that. You know what I mean, it was fun having a bit of verbal sparring with a pretty girl. Does that sound better?"

"I suppose you're trying to offer one of those compliments I hinted for yesterday so I'll take it for what it's worth."

"No trouble at all. Maybe this way is more fun than bickering." They headed up the creek in good spirits, their arguments of the earlier meetings ignored and the present threat of trouble simply pushed aside. At least it was pushed out of the talk. Ward had been through too many campaigns to let a pleasant diversion keep him from remembering danger. Still it was pretty hard to keep a wary eye on the canyon rim and still get any pleasure out of looking at the girl beside him.

Marion tried to change the subject, going into some detail on the matter of her father's geological studies. Ward's treasure-hunting experiences permitted him enough knowledge of the subject so that he could follow the main ideas, but he was more interested in hearing about the early stages of the trip west. It had been Marion who proposed the partnership between her father and Professor Giles. She had been working with Giles and knew what he was planning. She felt certain that the taller professor had known nothing of any treasure story. She was just as sure that the meeting along the trail with Burnside and Perrine was purely accidental. There never had been even the smallest hint to indicate that Henninger had known either of them before that moment.

"Accidental where your father was concerned," Ward interrupted dryly. "But maybe not with the other two. I think they were looking for your outfit."

"But how could they have known about us?"

"Your guess is as good as mine. Treasure hunters like that pair of thugs never stop trying. I think they got a hint somewhere—and my first guess is that somehow they got it from Ortega. The Mexican angle sounds significant although at the moment I don't know just how it must have worked."

"I just hope we can make father understand what this really means."

"We'll try." Ward liked that "we" part. Getting on a sort of partnership basis with Marion Henninger wasn't a bad idea at all.

Then they rounded a bend of the canyon and saw the Henninger camp just ahead. "You're camped right at the side of the sign of the tortoise," he told her shortly. "I wonder if your father recognized it? It's not so apparent except when one looks down from the rim."

"He didn't say anything about it."

There was a pause and then she added in a strange voice, "I hope it turns out to be just a lot of rocks. That sign of the tortoise is not a particularly happy one, the way I think of it."

The little man was in camp as they rode in, working over some papers which he put away with some evidence of haste. Apparently he had been working at something other than paper work, however, for his levis were muddy, and sweat stains showed on his shirt. He stared hard at his daughter and Ward but then asked anxiously, "More trouble?"

"No more than you heard about this morning. But that wasn't what I came to see you about. I'm afraid the next trouble may be aimed at you."

He helped the girl from her saddle and plunged right into the matter at hand, ignoring the little man's show of indignation. Henninger was trying hard to make it appear that he could not possibly be interested in a lost treasure story but Ward didn't let him get in even a good scoff. He simply went on with the tale he had to tell.

"I think you've made a mistake," he said seriously as he finished. "I think you have shown some interest in this thing and have impressed someone you may not even know about. I'm certain that Burnside and Perrine think you're on the trail of this treasure. I've got a pretty good hunch that they knew about you when they pretended to fall in with you and

ask for a job. You've got to be mighty careful about them; they'll stop at nothing to get their hands on the loot they wasted so many months in hunting."

"You still talk nonsense," the little man insisted.

"Father. Please," the girl interrupted. "Can't you see that . . ."

"A treasure hunter never admits anything," Ward told her. "Especially not to another person who has ever been bitten by the bug. Let me finish my warning. I think your father has some sort of clue to this supposed treasure, a map or something of the sort which he believes no one else has ever seen. The danger in that may be just as great as finding the actual treasure. There are men in the valley who will kill to get it—and I don't mean only Burnside and Perrine. It's pretty foolish to place yourself in danger for something which never existed."

When Henninger refused to comment he went on. "There is one more piece of evidence I've not mentioned. The treasure yarn refers to the village where the half-witted boy lived—along with his mother or sister or priest, depending on which version of the tale your prefer. I was a long time in realizing that there simply was no village in this valley at the time. The Ortega hacienda was virtually deserted, the lone survivor of the clan living there as a hermit. It was only on his death, some five years later, that his heir moved in and brought Salazar along to reorganize the place. That was when the village grew up around the hacienda and across the creek. I finally got around to discussing it with Salazar after the death of his employer and learned the truth. There simply was no village for the half-wit or any of those other characters to inhabit."

"Are you sure this Salazar told the truth?" Henninger asked, dropping his guard a little.

Ward smothered his grin. "There never was a more honest fellow in the world than Salazar. He could have established himself as heir to this whole valley with no one to question his right, but he went out of his way to make sure that a supposedly dead Ortega was actually alive. Then he spent a lot of money to bring him back here and make a landed gentleman of him—or to try. I'll reserve judgment on how well he may have succeeded. Don't question Salazar's honesty. If he says there was no village here I believe him."

Henninger nodded. "If I were as interested in this preposterous yarn as you seem to think I am, I would certainly

be convinced. It simply happens that I'm a geologist, not a treasure hunter."

Ward gave up. He was almost willing to believe that he had been wrong about the little man. "The important thing is that you're in danger," he said crisply. "It's not what I believe that's important, but what some other people believe. I can't force you to leave this canyon but I can provide you with a gun in case of emergency."

"Not that either. I'm afraid of guns. I wouldn't know how to use one and I might even injure myself with it."

Ward swung around, handing his spare Colt to the girl. "You take it, Miss Henninger. I happen to remember that you knew how to use it on another occasion."

She took the gun, avoiding his glance for a moment or two. Then she said quietly, "I should tell you that I did not shoot the Apache who was trying to kill you. Burnside did that just before he hurried over to join the other drivers."

For an instant he didn't know what to say. She picked up the thought for him. "I didn't explain because . . . well, because I resented the way you sounded so triumphant over the fact that I had used the gun when I'd claimed that no fighting would be necessary. I wasn't going to explain anything to you."

"I remember," he said with a grin. "You were mighty proddy about that time. And here I've been figuring that you saved my bacon when all the time it was my old pard Burnside!"

"That's why I explain now. I didn't mind being accused—when it was practically an accusation—but I won't take credit." Then the smile came fleetingly and she added, "Anyway, I *did* shoot. I suppose I missed."

He laughed aloud, partly at her tone. "I didn't understand you at all. Maybe I don't even now."

"Perhaps you shouldn't try."

Henninger broke in almost irritably. "What possible sense can there be in such talk?"

Ward aimed a grin at him. "Likely none. But it's fun. I think I'll come along some other time when I have more leisure to try it. Just now I've got things to do. Just watch your step."

Then he headed back to the sawmill.

CHAPTER ❖ ELEVEN

TWICE HE PULLED UP to study suspicious places on the west rim and once he put the roan to a full gallop where a twist of the canyon exposed him to possible fire from the east side. Nothing happened. There wasn't a sign that he had an enemy in the world.

Finally the sawmill was just ahead and he was almost ready to heave a sigh of relief when he saw that McCready had visitors. Three horses were picketed just below the mill and their riders lounged on a big log, apparently in friendly conversation with the sawyer and Kirk. That would have been fine if it had not been so certain that the trio were vaqueros. The same men he had seen at the ford on the previous morning, he thought. Perhaps the very men who had been stirring up all the Dark Raider talk. He still held the Winchester across his lap as he rode into camp.

McCready pulled back a little as he approached the group and Ward knew that the sawyer was playing it carefully, ready to take a hand if things went wrong. Kirk was already sitting back watchfully and it seemed clear that the two men were puzzled. Neither of them said a word.

Instead one of the Mexicans stood up to bow a polite greeting. "You are Don Owen Ward, I take it?" he asked, his English just a little too correct. Educated, Ward thought.

"Right. Looking for me?"

"Belatedly, I fear. It is always well to meet one's neighbors but I did not happen to be at the hacienda when you returned to the valley. I am Pablo Ortega."

That caught Ward completely by surprise. He hesitated

for only a split second but then slid from the saddle, holding the rifle negligently but in a manner that would permit him to use it without lost motion. "I was told that you had come to take over the rancho," he said shortly. It left the other man to do the talking.

He seemed to be willing. "Naturally I am very busy trying to get the business back into good condition but I have time to hear a few reports. I hear you have been having trouble."

"You heard that, eh?" Ward remarked with only a slight show of significance in the tone. Not enough to draw any sign of protest from Ortega.

"It is to be deplored that we should have enemies in our valley," the Mexican continued, his dark eyes showing nothing. "I wish to make my side of the valley into good grazing land with plenty of fat cattle. You also have plans of much quality. That makes us in a sense partners. The enemy of anyone in the valley is the enemy of all. I come to offer you whatever help you may need in meeting this common enemy."

Ward was still having trouble in getting over his surprise. This was certainly not a development that he had foreseen. He tried to estimate his man and knew only that he was dealing with a pretty smooth fellow. That fitted his scant knowledge of the Ortega character. The erring Pablo had never been noted for his fine morals but he was reputed to be clever. What did it mean?

Then another thought struck him. Somehow he could not recall ever having heard that Pablo was more than a sharp adventurer. Where had he gained this careful polish that he was putting on display?

"That's real decent of you," Ward said after a pause. "The help we need most is to find out who's causing it."

"Perhaps I can be of assistance on that score. You have met two men named Burnside and Perrine?"

"Many times."

"Good. Then you will not need my warning that they are unscrupulous treasure hunters. It is my belief that they have caused much of the trouble of which I hear, their object being to get a clear field to search for Maximilian gold."

Ward nodded quietly. "Unscrupulous is the word, Don Pablo. It was only a few days ago that they hinted broadly to me that they had come here at your suggestion. I got the idea that they were even claiming you as a partner."

That brought a quick twitch of annoyance to the smooth brown features. Ortega tried to hide it but just as quickly let it broaden. Trying to keep in mind that his acting has to be consistent, Ward thought.

"They would do something like that," the Mexican nodded. "You have only my word that I want nothing to do with them." Suddenly he smiled again. "I suppose that carries very little weight. I'm afraid my own bad reputation makes my word as poor a risk as theirs."

"Right now I'm not taking anybody on trust," Ward told him bluntly. "If I'm wrong I'll apologize later."

"No offense taken. My offer of friendship still holds."

"Thanks. Now maybe you can tell me a few things. How did it happen that the Dark Raider tales started going around the valley before Perrine and Burnside arrived here?"

Ortega shrugged. "The Dark Raider superstition arises frequently. Sometimes for no good reason. In this case I think it was Apaches. There was an Apache band in the region, as you found to your discomfort. I think the early troubles were at their hands. Perrine and Burnside simply seized upon the opportunity to carry on the fright."

"Any idea who raided this camp last night? It wasn't Perrine and Burnside unless they've picked up some allies—and I don't think they're anxious to cut anybody else in on their game."

"That I would have no way of knowing."

"And you wouldn't have any way of knowing who supplied the Apaches with brandy? In bottles?"

Ortega shook his head unhappily. "I detect an air of distrust in your tone, señor. Possibly you could be more open-minded if it had not happened that another party had entered into the treasure picture." He gestured up the canyon and added, "You know, of course, that this professor is believed to have information about the Maximilian gold?"

"I guessed," Ward said grimly. "People have been picking up information about Maximilian gold for several years now. I don't think there is any such gold around here—and I don't care who else looks for it as long as they don't interfere with other things. That goes for Professor Henninger, Hellsfire Burnside, or you. Understand?"

Ortega still maintained his careful suavity. "I understand.

Now we go. Please think about this carefully, my friend. Maybe you will believe me when you do."

He gestured to the silent vaqueros behind him and the trio moved quietly toward their horses. It was a most dignified withdrawal but Ward was not impressed. Something about the whole performance kept clamoring for recognition but no definite memory would come.

"What the hell do yuh make of him?" McCready muttered as soon as the visitors were in their saddles. "Kinda impressive somehow."

"That's just the point. I feel pretty sure that I never met any of those fellows before but I still feel that I ought to know Don Pablo."

"You seen him once, didn't yuh?"

"Not as an individual. I can't imagine that I would have remembered anything about him from that occasion without knowing why I remembered it."

"He makes an impression," Kirk observed. "Ye'd not forget him soon."

"But what's he up to?" McCready asked practically. "Seems like he was so all-fired anxious to git cozy that he even admitted about his past."

"It's no secret. He used that to impress us with his honesty." "Why?"

"To make us let our guard down perhaps." He chuckled wryly as he added, "But maybe I gave him something to think about when I mentioned Perrine and Burnside. A little pushing and shoving in the enemy camp wouldn't hurt us any."

They talked about it at some length while taking care of the afternoon chores. McCready was tearing down the engine now, the last break having hinted that patchwork repairs had reached a practical limit. Now he could start replacing defective parts with the new ones Ward had brought from the freight line station. In a way it was a good time to make the big repairs. No one was in any hurry to get lumber. Maybe it was a big gamble to assume that anyone would be buying in the future. While this Dark Raider talk was bothering the new settlers they wouldn't be risking unnecessary investments.

"We'll figure on the bright side," Ward told the other men. "Spend a week on the engine if you need to. That will still give us the rest of the summer and the autumn for running the steam mill. Meanwhile we get to work on the dam.

If we can get it into operation before the winter we'll be in good shape. If not, then the steam outfit will have to last for another year."

They had worked out the details with some care, Ward's army engineering training sufficient for the purpose. The spillway would run close to the east side of the gorge and could be constructed over what was now dry rock. Then the opposite wall would be dynamited, one big chunk of cliff almost enough to form the entire dam—if they could get it to drop into the right place. A minimum of earth fill would block the present flow of water and divert it into the spillway and over the water wheel that would be installed.

That night again they divided watches, taking different positions and organizing for any kind of necessary defense. The night passed without alarm.

At dawn Ward slipped out of camp for another patrol, warning his companions to stay alert. "Tonight may have been planned to give us a bit of proof that Ortega meant what he said. Maybe they'll give us more time to let our guard down. We'll just bear that in mind."

Once more the scouting expedition proved fruitless. No one had come into the area during the night. At least no one had prowled around the lower end of the canyon. Ward did not range far enough to either side to be sure about any other territory.

During the morning he concentrated on definite plans for the blasting of the big cliff, but a little before noon Joe Beech came up the trail with a report from Ben Hawksley. Since there was so much of it the report was in writing. Norma's writing.

Ben had found Salazar alone and the old man had talked freely enough when there was no one around to overhear. He had located Pablo Ortega through the same Julio Gonzales who had accompanied him on his visit to Ward at the Hawksley place. Gonzales had told him that the missing heir was in trouble with one of the bandit chiefs who had become virtually a provincial governor during the revolutionary muddle which preceded the Diaz dictatorship. Salazar didn't know just why Ortega had been imprisoned but he had sent ransom money as Gonzales proposed. Gonzales had delivered the money and come back to the rancho with Pablo. There had been plenty of proof that the man brought back by Gonzales

was really Pablo Ortega. All of his papers were in order.

On other matters there were no hints or information. Stimax had not been called upon to treat any gunshot wounds.

McCready grunted unhappily at the latter bit of information, feeling that it cast further doubts upon his ability as a rifleman but Ward paid little attention. Those vague memories were beginning to stir again. At least he knew why Gonzales had seemed familiar. Julio Gonzales had been pretty well known to military officers along the border. He had been a gun runner, a smuggler, a cattle rustler and just about everything else that an international boundary seems to breed. Ward had seen him only once but now he recalled the name as well as the man himself. He had to blame his own condition for not having recognized him at Hawksley's.

"Any good?" McCready asked.

"Maybe. Let me think about it for a while."

"Better think real hard. Somethin's stirrin', sure as hell. This quiet's beginnin' to git me proddy."

Ward felt the same way about it but he didn't want to show his own anxiety. Partly as a gesture of confidence and partly because he wanted to get away from the camp he started upstream in the middle of the afternoon, taking all possible precautions although he had a feeling that there would actually be no danger to him just now. It wasn't just a feeling; he thought he knew why the attacks had ceased.

It all fitted together rather well. Ortega had come to the valley with plans. Ward still didn't know what those plans were but it seemed certain that the black sheep of the Ortegas had been dismayed to learn that there was a man in the neighborhood who had known him at some time in the past—an army officer. So Ortega had planned to get rid of this threat to him. Maybe he had brought in those Apaches. It even seemed likely. Julio Gonzales had been reputed to have a certain influence with the Chiricahuas. And there was the matter of the brandy—although Ben had apparently learned nothing of any supply at the hacienda.

The Apache attack had failed. The murder effort at Hawksley's place had failed. The night attack on the sawmill camp had failed. Then Ortega had changed. Why? Obviously because he had learned something. Julio Gonzales must have gone up from the hacienda to tell him that this man Ward did not remember Pablo Ortega. If Ward was not to be feared

then it might pay to stop gunning him and hope to use him for some other purpose. Ward wished he could guess what that other purpose might be.

He found the Henningers busy with camp chores. They exchanged easy greetings with him but then the professor asked an abrupt question, his tone indicating that it meant a lot to him.

"Has there been a major flood through this canyon since you first began to work here?"

"There are floods every spring. That's one of the things I'm figuring on. If I can impound that flood water and release it during the summer I'll have power for the mill and at the same time do a favor for the farmers in the lower valley. They'll have water when they need it instead of too much in the spring and not enough in late summer."

"I understand that part. But would the spring floods have altered the structure of the canyon itself. Can I assume that there would have been changes other than natural erosion?"

"Likely. A good bit of this rock is pretty porous stuff. Some of it is more like hard clay than rock. Every so often a big chunk of wall will tumble down. That's why there's so much of it still around the canyon floor. It breaks down faster than it can wash away and go downstream."

"But not right along here?"

"No. The rock walls are really rock at this stretch. The softer strata seem to be up at the head of the canyon or down the gorge about a half mile."

"Thank you. I'll keep that in mind." The finality in his tone indicated that he did not propose to explain himself further.

Marion remained out of the conversation entirely but she walked a short distance with Ward when he started back to camp, chatting casually with him as he led his horse along. Once out of earshot of her father, however, she spoke more seriously. "I still think he's up to something. He seems to be measuring, searching. And I have the feeling that we are watched every hour of the day."

"Likely you're right. Have you actually seen anyone?"

"No. It's just a most unscientific hunch." She laughed a little nervously. "For a woman who has been priding herself on her logical mind I seem to be having some very strange ideas."

CHAPTER ❖ TWELVE

ANOTHER NIGHT PASSED without alarm, Ward spending most of it so wide awake that he took most of the guard duty. His mind continued to battle with that reluctant hint of memory, completely killing off any desire to sleep but never coming up with an answer. Somehow Ortega ought to mean something to him even though he knew that he was not remembering the man from any actual memory of him.

"I think it's time I did some real scouting," he told McCready over coffee next morning. "I need to know who's watching us. I want to see if anybody is spying on the Henningers. And I'd sure as hell like to see some sign that the Ortega men are moving against Perrine and Burnside."

"So what if you find it?" McCready grunted unhappily.

"Then maybe I can take a hand. I've had about enough of this sitting around and waiting for the other fellow to make his move. At least I want to have some idea about what that move is likely to be."

He made his usual circle of the hills near the mouth of the gorge but this time he avoided the open valley and swung across to the long promontory which divided the two branches of the creek. He moved with caution, leading the horse after first climbing to the rim which commanded the lower canyon. After a few hundred yards he found a sign, probably the tracks left by the man who had made that sniping attempt. He backtracked far enough to feel certain that the bushwhacker had crossed the hill to the west, then he pushed on up along the canyon, keeping just a short distance back from the rim.

Once he pulled up, when he thought he heard the sound

of a distant shot but it was not followed by any other such noise and he could not be sure.

He was tempted to move toward the canyon for a look down but decided that it would not be good policy. For the present he preferred to keep himself out of sight entirely, hoping that his sign reading would be worth more than any casual peeks down into the gorge.

The tongue of mountain dropped off a little and he knew that he was approaching the point where both Embrujada Gulch and Tortuga Canyon had their beginnings. Actually this hill was a sort of island, the original stream coming down from the high country to spread out over some shelving rocks and divide into two separate brooks. One went down the gulch, one went down the canyon, meeting out in the valley. It was this dividing point which was just ahead. And there he found where a horse had been picketed.

He studied the tracks for some time, deciding that the animal had been tied there until some fairly recent time. Then it had been moved on, apparently straight out across the shelving rocks with their flowing swirls of shallow water.

He went back a short distance but knew that it would be useless. The man who had come up here had ridden the horse up through Embrujada Gulch and had left the horse for a while. Then he had returned and ridden forward. Because everything was bare rock he had to guess at those facts. Nowhere could he find any well-defined boot marks. So the man must have gone on out across the rocks when he left the horse. And now he was moving in the same direction on horseback.

Ward considered for a moment and then climbed into the saddle. It didn't seem so important to keep out of sight now. Better to cover the ground a little more rapidly and pick up the trail of this mysterious rider.

He guided the roan out into the open, letting the animal pick his way across the shallows. Only a few feet to his right were the falls where the major portion of the water dropped down into the head of Tortuga Canyon, the remaining trickle winding down a less abrupt slope to become the minor branch of the stream in Embrujada Gulch.

Twice he spotted hoof marks in the sand which formed thin beds along the ragged edges of the rock surface. The other man had gone straight across, either into the timber which covered the far ridge or perhaps down on a long angle into the gulch.

As he reached the edge of something like decent soil he leaned forward to study the hoof marks—and the move was all that saved him. Somewhere in the trees just ahead a gun barked its vicious challenge and a slug whined over—just where his head had so recently been.

All in one motion he pulled his own Colt, swung to the side so as to present as small a target as possible, and slammed a pair of answering shots into the timber where a puff of smoke marked the position of the bushwhacker. The enemy fired again and Ward pulled the roan around in an attempt to use Indian tactics. If he could use the horse as a shield while he charged in on the unknown enemy he might be able to—

That was when the injured leg played him false. It refused to hold his weight as he hung to the opposite side and before he could recover himself he sprawled to the ground while the horse galloped on to the edge of the timber.

He rolled quickly, the action more of a reflex than anything else as the shock of the fall had left him a little groggy. Without knowing quite what he was doing he still moved fast to get out of the open, stopping to catch his breath only when he was behind a pile of boulders. A single slug crashed past him just as he reached cover but then the only sound was a crashing in the brush. The attacker was getting away—and without Ward having gotten even a glimpse of him.

"Same damned thing all the time!" he grumbled half aloud. "I never seem to find out who I'm fighting."

He spent a couple of minutes in making certain that his bad leg had not suffered any new injury. There was a tiny seep of blood through the bandage and he knew that he must have opened the wound, either in his attempt at acrobatic riding or in the subsequent fall, but the leg bore his weight well and he knew that he had been hurt more in pride than in body.

He caught his horse and then started after his ambusher. It did not take long to find the marks where the man had gone down the rocky trail beside the waterfall but the prints were not clear, there being no soil of any account on the well washed rocks. Ward decided to leave that part of the investigation until later. For the present it seemed like the best idea to track the fellow's retreat. If Ortega was now showing some real interest in the upper canyon it was worth knowing more about that interest.

He picked up the trail without difficulty. The retreating

horseman had been in full flight for several hundred yards straight out from the rim of the canyon but then he had slowed the pace and circled to the south. A quarter of a mile farther on he had skirted the clearing where the Ward-Mc-Cready lumbering operations had been carried on during the previous winter and spring. There Ward spotted new tracks. Someone had ridden past this spot several times, going back and forth to the canyon rim. The new trail swung in to follow the other tracks.

Suddenly Ward decided to abandon direct pursuit. It wouldn't tell him too much and there were too many chances of another ambush. It might be better to cut for the rim and check up on this side trail. Perhaps Marion had been more right than she knew with her hunches. It was beginning to look as though there had been spies on either side of the canyon.

Five minutes later he knew that he was right. No one was at the spot now but two men had watched from this point pretty often recently. They had left plenty of tracks and he didn't doubt that he could name them. The difference in the sizes of boot marks fairly shouted the names of Burnside and Perrine.

So far there was nothing surprising about any of it. Perrine and Burnside had decided to operate on their own instead of with Ortega. They had put their chips on Henninger as the man who had the key to the treasure. Somehow Ortega had reached the same conclusion. Working separately the two parties had watched the Henningers from lookout posts on either side of the gorge.

Then he knew that he was wrong. There certainly *was* something surprising about it. Why were both posts now abandoned? The Ortega lookout had left his spot at least an hour ago, maybe more. And there had been no one on this side since yesterday. The tracks were all at least a day old.

He swung the horse quickly and headed back into the north, skirting the rim of the canyon to save time and distance. One look down into the canyon had shown nothing wrong around the Henninger tents but he could see only a small part of the camp itself. No one moved there. Maybe that was enough to make him uneasy.

This time he took the risk of leading his horse down over the rocky trail which led past the falls. It was skittish work

but he managed to keep the roan from spooking until they were on fairly level ground. Then he looked for tracks once more, knowing that it was not likely that any would be seen. All of this part of the gulch had been under water only a month or two earlier when the spring floods made the falls at least five times as wide as they were in summer. The rocks were well washed, no dirt remaining to show a track.

When he had satisfied himself he climbed into the saddle once more and headed south along the creek, still trying to figure out what this new bit of action meant. Then the Henninger camp came into view and he understood. Just at the side of the wagon was a body.

At first Ward thought the little geologist was dead, but when he slid from the saddle and knelt beside him, Henninger moved his lips. The words that came were almost soundless but Ward thought he said something about a map. He made no effort to get more out of him, however; Henninger was in bad shape and needed quick attention. The little man had been beaten brutally about the face and head. His nose was smashed and broken. There were a couple of long cuts across his right cheek. Scalp wounds made him appear all the more bloody and at least one of the wounds in the white hair appeared to be the result of a violent blow. Probably a skull fracture, Ward thought.

He took in this grim inventory almost at a glance and then hurried across to the tents, dreading what he might find there. To his relief both tents were empty. Someone had made a shambles of the property which had been kept in them but there was no indication that any struggle had taken place in either. There was no sign of Marion around the camp.

Ward picked up a blanket and a garment which he didn't even pause to identify. Only after he was back beside the wounded man did he realize that it was a skirt he was turning into a pillow. He lifted the bloody head gingerly and slipped the folded skirt under it. Then he spread the blanket over the little man, noticing that Henninger had been wearing a gray flannel shirt but no pants. The shirt showed dirt as well as blood, the long, lightweight underdrawers were unmarked.

It struck him as mighty odd but there was no time to think about the matter. A distant clatter of iron on rock told him that someone had just rounded the bend of the canyon. It was the blonde girl riding one of the wagon ponies.

At first Ward assumed that she had ridden for help but then he knew that she was pretty much at ease, riding easily and without haste. Obviously she did not know what had happened to her father.

He went to the creek then, picking up the pail of water which stood on a flat rock near a deep pool. The pail was almost full and the water looked fresh. He filed the fact away for future consideration but hurried back to the injured man. Using his own neckerchief he began to wash away the blood, getting only a small show of protest from Henninger. The man could feel the pain of having injuries touched but he was not really conscious.

Ward heard the hoofbeats increase their tempo and looked up as Marion almost fell from the saddle in her haste. Her careful calm was gone now, only astonishment and horror showing on the smooth features as she stared down at her father. "What happened?" she exclaimed. "Is he—is he badly hurt?"

"Real bad, I'm afraid," Ward told her. "I'm trying to wash away some of the blood and find out how deep some of these wounds go."

"You're sure you don't know?" she demanded, her tone changing swiftly to one of open suspicion. "By the look of your clothes and his the two of you must have been in a regular brawl!"

Ward didn't think it wise to offer the obvious retort, that even if he had been brawling with Professor Henninger it was scarcely likely that the little man could have dirtied him much. "He was this way when I found him—except for the blanket and pillow. I brought them from one of the tents. By the way, somebody searched the tents."

She did not seem interested in that point. Her only real interest was in the injured man and she worked tenderly to do her best for him. By that time Ward knew that her best—or any other best—would not be enough. One of the skull wounds was a nasty hole. Henninger was dying.

Once the little man opened his eyes, but it was a gesture of no significance. He did not seem to see the pair who bent over him even though Marion spoke quickly as the eyelids fluttered. By that time Ward had turned the nursing duties over to the girl, concentrating on an effort to read sign around camp. There were a few prints at a spot where sand had washed into depression of the rocky ledge. Boots

with high heels. Much the same size footprint as Henninger's which were close by. If the scientist had been wearing cowboy boots the two lots might have been confused.

He stirred the almost dead fire and caught a pungent odor. Something had burned here and had not yet been completely destroyed. He poked at the ashes and watched a fragment of cloth take quick flame as the air reached it. Again his grim experiences with fires stood him in good stead. Dead fires could often tell a story. This one was doing a bit of talking now and he raked through its ashes with the end of the stick, drawing out three or four round metal objects. They were well blackened but he knew that they were buttons.

"Ward!" the girl exclaimed. "I think . . ."

He hurried to her, almost tripping over one of Henninger's flat-heeled boots. The other boot was almost at the door of the nearer tent. He noted the fact in passing. The immediate claim upon his attention was beside the wagon where Marion knelt beside her father.

She straightened up a little as Ward stopped to kneel beside her. "I think he is dead," she stated, the words coming without any show of emotion whatever. Some of her amazing self-control had come back.

Ward felt for a pulse and then listened for a heart-beat. There was neither. "I'm very sorry," he said, not knowing what else to say.

She met his gaze without any attempt to hide her suspicion. "I wish I could believe that."

"You'd better. Blaming me will only confuse the truth. Now tell me what happened here this morning. Why were you away from camp? How long have you been gone? What was the situation when you left? Don't omit any details. I want to know everything you can possibly remember."

The sharpness of Ward's tone carried a conviction Marion seemed to recognize. "I went to find you," she said shortly.

He gave her a hand and led her away from the dead man. "I was scouting," he said. "Somebody tried to bushwhack me up at the falls. I saw by his tracks that he'd been down here. So I came down and found your father—only a few minutes before you arrived. Your father tried to tell me something with almost his last conscious breath. I think he used the word map but I can't be sure. Do you have any idea what he meant?"

"Only what both of us could guess. Did you see the man who shot at you?"

"No." He explained his own disheveled condition in relating the story, pleased that she was apparently accepting his word as well as his guidance now.

"Can we take him down to the valley now?" she asked in a small voice.

"Better clear up a few points first," he said. "I don't propose to let his killer get away. Let's work things out. Answer my question—what was the situation when you left?"

This time she kept to the questions. "This morning I thought I saw someone moving on the west side of the canyon. High up. I told father. At first I was sure he did not believe me but suddenly he changed his attitude and asked me to take one of the horses and ride down to the sawmill to ask your advice. I had a notion that he was using it as an excuse to get rid of me for a while but I—"

"Why did he want to get rid of you?"

"I'm only guessing. I supposed that he wanted to do some kind of searching around here without me to know what he was doing."

"Seems reasonable."

"Anyway, I went. You were not at the mill and your men told me that they didn't know how long you would be gone. I waited about an hour and came back."

Her voice broke a little at the end, and Ward let her recover herself before he said, "I hope you'll be willing to help me around here. I can read the sign but some of it doesn't make sense. If you can forget your grief for a few minutes I'd like to borrow that first-class brain of yours."

"Why the flattery? That doesn't sound at all like you."

"Two good reasons," he told her frankly. "One is simply that I need somebody to help me with some straight thinking. The other is an idea I got from something your father said the other day. I'd rather not tell you what it is just yet."

She gestured wearily. "Let's go. I'll do what I can."

CHAPTER ❖ THIRTEEN

WARD POINTED to the dead man. "Your father is not wearing any pants. Was he dressed when you left?"

"Of course. He never went out of his tent partly clad. He was almost fussy about such things."

"Boots?" He pointed to the way the footgear had been thrown aside.

"Fully dressed," she insisted. "An hour before I left here."

"Any idea why he might have taken his pants and boots off?"

"Not the slightest."

"Take a look through the tents. See if anything is missing and locate the pants he was wearing."

She was frowning in more perplexity than grief now and he watched her as she went about the task he had set. When she came back the frown was deeper. "They're not there—but I can't say that anything else is missing. What does it mean?"

"That's what I'm asking you to guess. Now follow along while I work out the ideas I can read from the obvious sign. Maybe you can offer an interpretation that escapes me."

He crossed to the fire and pointed to the charred buttons. "This is what happened to the pants. Levi buttons or I miss my guess. Is that the kind of pants he was wearing?"

"Yes."

"I work it out something like this. Your father was here in the camp when he had a visitor. It was someone he knew, someone he didn't consider to be an enemy."

"Someone like yourself?"

"Stop trying to make out a case against me, dammit! Look over there in the sand and you'll see tracks that neither your father nor I made."

"I'm sorry."

"Just listen and stop acting like a woman!"

"I'm listening." She didn't show any particular reaction to his sharpness. "But how do you know the stranger was not so strange to him?"

"Mostly that water bucket. Your father had just filled it from the creek. It was still full—and not slopped over. He was in no hurry and no excitement. He put the bucket down carefully and met the visitor as a friend. Right after that the other man declared himself. I imagine he pulled a gun and threatened to use it unless your father told him what he wanted to know. When your father refused he was pistol whipped, the other man trying to beat it out of him."

She shuddered a little but asked, "Any reason to think it happened that way?"

"It fits with what we believe and know. Several people thought that your father had some secret clue to the Maximilian treasure. I think one of them tried to beat it out of him."

"But what was it?"

"A map, I suppose. I'm sure your father mentioned a map in that last little gasp."

"Did he mean that he gave up such a map?"

"No way of telling. I can't even guess."

"But what is the meaning of the burned trousers?"

"I was hoping you could make some kind of a guess on that point. It seems like a pretty safe bet that the pants were deliberately burned."

"How do you know?"

"The condition of the fire. I think the fire was pretty well burned down, breakfast having been some time in the past, as you indicated. Cloth doesn't burn too readily and if they'd been thrown into a dying fire—or dropped there by accident—there would have been a lot of unburned material. But that wasn't the way of it. Somebody burned them carefully, keeping every bit of material in the fire. I'd like to know why."

"Does it matter? What we need to find out is the identity of the fiend who did this. I can't see that the burning of my

father's trousers had anything to do with it."

"At the moment I can't either. But it has to mean something. The burning was too careful for the act to be meaningless."

She seemed to break then and Ward suggested, "You'd better sit down for a while and I'll get ready to start down the canyon. We might as well get out of here as soon as possible."

"I'll help," she insisted. "It's my problem."

"I feel partly responsible," he told her. "After all, this is the valley I tried to organize into something civilized. Until regular law can be established it's my place to keep things right. I didn't do it."

"You tried to tell us not to come up here."

"I should have kept you out. I had the right, being as it's my land. Because I didn't want to throw my weight around I let things get out of hand."

"Don't blame yourself. Will you harness the wagon while I pack?"

"Good girl."

She started toward the tents but paused, asking in a voice which hinted at the emotion she was suppressing, "What shall we do with . . . ?"

"We'll take him along. Later, after you've had a chance to think about it, we'll decide about a burial place. Try to forget it now and let's get things done." He was having trouble with his own voice; sympathy was trying to get the upper hand when all logic warned him that they had to ignore the emotional stress and make some fast moves. Just in case the killer of Henninger had failed to get what he was after it was possible that he might try again, perhaps believing that this mysterious map—or whatever it was—was in the possession of the girl.

He lifted the body of the dead geologist into the wagon while Marion was packing the personal effects that had been in the tests. Then he harnessed up and they moved off down the canyon, leaving the tents and other properties behind. That could be handled later; just now it seemed like a good idea to get the girl down to the sawmill camp so that someone could look after her while Ward went into the hills. There would still be ample daylight to look for the trail of the killer. In a way it was too bad that the trail had not

been followed more promptly but at the time it had not appeared to be so important.

Ward told the story to McCready and Kirk when they arrived at the mill, issuing swift orders. "Miss Henninger is to remain here and keep out of sight. There's a chance that she may be the next point of attack. It's not likely to happen so soon, I suppose, so one of you might as well hustle up the canyon and bring back the rest of the Henninger property. I'm climbing the east slope right away to see if I can pick up that killer's sign. Play it as safe as you can. I shouldn't be gone more than three hours. By that time I'll know something or it'll be getting too dark to learn anything more."

Pausing only to pick up a cold snack from the cook shack, he switched to a fresh horse and started straight up the mountain shoulder on the east side of the camp. It seemed likely that the retreating killer would have come down the slope toward the valley and Ward hoped to cut the sign somewhere on the south side of the hill. After that the direction of the retreat should tell a part of the story.

He let the horse climb easily, knowing that he might need reserve in the animal before his chore would be finished. Then he moved across the slope at a long angle, trying to keep an alert eye on the ground while his mind struggled with the puzzle of the things he already knew. It seemed certain that the Henningers had been under observation from both sides of the canyon ever since they had come in from Perdita Springs. Until this morning, that is. Apparently both watchers had been missing from their posts at the time of the attack on the geologist. Why? Had both gone away to report the departure of the girl from the camp? Or had one left for that purpose while the other went to make the murderous attack on the old man? Either possibility seemed reasonable.

Presently he found the marks of repeated passage up and down the hill. The east side watchers had made quite a trail. Now he had to decide whether the bushwhacker—and probable killer of Henninger—had continued on that trail. It annoyed him that he had not paid closer attention to the tracks when he first followed them. Now he could not be sure without backtracking. It meant a loss of time but he knew that he would have to do it.

Twenty minutes later he knew that the man he wanted had indeed followed the marked trail. He dismounted, studied the sign with care at the point where the retreating killer had cut into the former sign, and noted something that he had missed in his haste earlier. The unknown was riding a horse that left a faint but distinct oddity in his track. Either the horse was slightly lame on his near front leg or he had been shod with one of those corrective shoes. Not many riders in this part of the country went to the trouble of correcting a horse's gait but occasionally men would use a built-up shoe. This track looked like that kind of a job. It was not much of a clue but it was better than nothing.

Then he realized that this had not been the first time that particular horse had covered this trail. The same distinctive marks showed along the hoofprints which had been made by the cliff watcher. This posed a sort of puzzle. Why had a man who had been spying from the eastern rim decided to come up through Embujada Gulch to approach the head of the canyon from the west side? •

He thought about it as he headed down the slope once more, following the trail easily but keeping alert to the chance that his quarry might have turned off somewhere. It took him quite a time to reach the edge of the timber and when he could see across the valley he was a little disgruntled to discover that no one was in sight out there. Somehow he had hoped that the unknown would still be in sight across the open valley. Considering the time which had elapsed it hadn't been much of a hope but he still felt a sort of disappointment.

He walked his mount out into the open, seeing how the trail led straight south toward one of the few uncleared patches of the valley. Then he turned back. It didn't seem like good sense to cross open country and move into what might easily be an ambush. That weighted horseshoe gave him something to work on; it would be better to make sure that Marion Henninger was in a safe spot before he carried out his next bit of pursuit. The grim anger which had been driving him ever since his discovery of the battered form of Professor Henninger had to be put aside for more reasonable thoughts. A man didn't accomplish much simply by letting himself stay mad.

He swung back at an angle, aiming for the mouth of the

canyon, and then he saw the five riders coming across the creek at the upper ford. The distance made recognition impossible, particularly when he had the afternoon sun in his eyes, but he thought that he was seeing Ortega riders. Because he didn't want to get involved in any more play acting he spurred his bronc to a run and hit the canyon trail fast.

His first glimpse of the sawmill camp told him that something was wrong. It was too quiet. No one moved anywhere. Then he drew closer and saw the way things had been strewn on the ground beside the Henninger wagon. He had his gun out by that time but still there was nothing to indicate that anyone was in the camp.

Moving cautiously he made sure that he was not being watched and then he scanned the abundant sign on the ground. Two men had searched the wagon, breaking open various boxes and throwing the contents hastily aside. Finally he found good prints and knew who had done it. Those big tracks were undoubtedly those of Bull Perrine, the smaller ones certainly Burnside's. He had a feeling that the Burnside prints would match the ones in the upper canyon but it was only a guess.

Almost at a run now he circled the buildings, discovering McCready and Kirk behind the cook shack. Both were tied hand and foot, back to back with each other. Both had gags tied tightly across their mouths.

He cut them loose quickly and heard a torrent of bad language from McCready. The sawyer's mouth had been cut at the corners by the tight gag but it did not prevent him from establishing himself as a master at profanity.

"Make sense!" Ward snapped harshly. "Who did it? Burnside and Perrine?"

"Damned polecats! They soft-talked me into gettin' off-guard and then they slugged me. When I woke up I was hawg-tied like you found me."

Kirk was less loud but equally rueful. Between them they told the story which neither seemed to know in its entirety. McCready had been the first victim. He had sent Kirk to pick up the remainder of the Henninger camp equipment and had seen Perrine and Burnside coming up the trail almost as soon as Kirk was out of sight. He had held a gun on them but they had persuaded him that they came as friends.

Their story was that they had been watching the Ortega line camp—for what reason they did not say—and had seen a man named Gonzales ride in from the mountains. They had overheard only a part of what he had to say but he was reporting that he had tried to get a treasure map from Henninger and had failed. Then Catron had yelled for other riders to saddle up, telling them that they would still get the map if they moved fast.

"Catron?" Ward interrupted, his voice taking on a quick pitch of excitement. "Are you sure he used the name Catron?"

"Yep. It didn't mean nothin' to me but I wasn't askin' no questions."

"No need. I know something now. But what happened then? Where's Miss Henninger?"

"I'm comin' to that. Them polecats claimed we oughta git her away from here before the Ortega men could git here and do her harm. He said they figgered she had this here map which her pappy didn't seem to have. It was Burnside done the talkin', by the way.

"Anyhow, I wasn't havin' none. I told him we'd stick at the camp and hold 'em off. That's when he drawed on me—so goddam fast I never had a chance."

"That's Burnside," Ward nodded. "A real fast gun."

He heard his words as though in a dream. It wasn't Owen Ward talking. This was some stranger who was trying to keep calm when he wanted to rave and curse, a damned fool who thought he ought to keep calm in spite of his feelings. Suddenly he realized that he had been fighting himself ever since the first shock of knowledge, blaming himself for the brief minutes of over-confidence yet knowing that he did not dare indulge himself in the emotionalism that was blasting at him. He had blundered but he couldn't think about it now. He had to get the facts without letting himself or these other men distort them with their excitement.

"Get on with it," he urged, the icy calm almost grotesque. "What happened next?"

McCready slumped to a log, holding his head in both hands as though trying to force the ache that was threatening to make him sick. "Perrine sidled around behind me—and then the roof fell in."

"Then what?"

"I dunno. Next thing I knowed I was like yuh found me."

"You, Kirk! What's your yarn?"

Kirk took it up quickly, seeming to sense Ward's grim haste. He had come back down the canyon to find the camp apparently deserted. He had just spotted the body of Henninger on the ground when he had been caught flat-footed by Burnside. The smaller gunman had kept him covered while Perrine came out and tied him up—to the inert form of McCready. He had not seen Marion Henninger but he believed that she had been tied to the saddle of a horse that was tied back in the brush.

"Which way did they go?" Ward demanded.

"Up the mountain but not along the rim. More to the east, I think."

"Hear any talk?"

"Only grunts."

"Riders comin' up the crick," McCready's pained mutter warned. "And we ain't got no guns, I'm thinkin'. Mine's been took."

Kirk dived for the bunk house and returned swiftly to report that the place had been cleaned out. Perrine and Burnside were guarding against armed pursuit.

Ward was thinking fast now. At last a couple of clear patterns were showing themselves—if he could figure out a way to do something about it. Oddly enough, after all his efforts at logical thinking, he had been led to the truth by two casual phrases used by Ed McCready. He knew that he should not have needed the hints but it was too late to keep blaming himself.

"We're licked," he told the other men. "At least that's our story when these riders arrive."

"Still wearin' their purty pants and outfits," McCready grumbled. "I never could figger how a Mex cowpoke could keep lookin' so much like a dude!"

These were the five men Ward had seen in the valley but but now he was not so anxious to avoid them. With affairs at such a desperate juncture they might be useful. He had to try.

Ortega was in the lead, his men following in pairs. They were alert and watchful but not openly hostile—yet. Ward took a step or two to meet them, making certain that he kept his hand well away from his gun. Now was the time to meet guile with guile.

"We want Burnside and Perrine," Ortega stated, his voice still a model of precise English but the tone now harsh and uncompromising. "Where are they?"

"You tell me and I'll help you get them!" Ward could be harsh too.

"Then they have been here, no?"

"They have been here, yes!" He gestured toward the blanket-wrapped form by the wagon. "I think it was Burnside who killed Professor Henninger this morning. I *know* it was Burnside and his brute of a partner who came here and kidnapped the professor's daughter. Tell them about it, McCready!"

He stood back, adding only a comment or two while McCready answered the swift questions of the Mexican. It was clear that the sawyer didn't know why he was having to play up to the man who had been practically accused of ordering the murder of Henninger—or why Ward had now accused Burnside—but he still kept enough of his wits to follow Ward's cue. He told the story in some detail."

"You know what this means?" Ortega asked, turning back to Ward.

"I can guess. They tried to get something from the man and now want to make sure that his daughter does not have it."

"What?"

"I don't know. Something connected with the treasure fable, I suppose."

"You are right. My men watched the canyon this morning. He saw . . . but let it go. You understand enough. Now tell me where you think they went."

Ward was ready for that one. Like McCready, he told the truth. "I'd guess that they headed for a spot where they once had a camp when they were treasure hunting some years ago. Do you know the upper valley east of the falls?"

"No. I do not know the country. You are aware of that."

"Sure enough." He gestured upstream. "This is a blind canyon but above the falls at the upper end there are more canyons. About a quarter of a mile northeast of the falls there's a bit of rocky country which makes a mighty good hideout. Protected camp, shelter and all that sort of thing. Kirk says they headed in that direction when they pulled out of here with the girl."

"Then you think they would go there?"

"Seems likely. If they expect to get information out of her they'll want to be close to where they think the treasure is hidden so they can use the information in a hurry. They know we'll be after them and they have to play for time. A good hideout in the right place seems like the thing they have to have."

"How do we reach this spot?"

"Better follow them directly. You've got a little daylight to track them—and they were in a hurry so the trail should be plain enough."

"Why not up the canyon?"

"It's a dead end. Horses can't get out around the falls."

"And what do you do?"

"For the time being nothing. I'm beat—and my men are in worse shape. It's up to you, señor. Just try to make sure that you don't hurt the lady."

Ortega hesitated only momentarily before leading his men off on the trail which one of them had already picked up. Ward turned to meet the accusing glances of the sawyers.

"What the hell happened to you?" McCready demanded in open disgust.

CHAPTER ❖ FOURTEEN

WARD MOVED TIREDLY toward the cook shack but his voice was sharp and incisive as he spoke without looking toward Kirk. "Keep your ears open, Sandy. Make sure they don't leave anybody behind to watch us."

Once out of sight he moved rapidly, picking up cold rations and gathering extra ammunition. By the time Kirk reported that the Ortega riders had gone on up the mountain Ward was ready.

"Mac, you stay here and give yourself a chance to get over that knock. Sandy, head for the Springs as fast as you can catch yourself a mount of some kind. I don't think our playful friends took them very far, only just to get them out of our reach for awhile. Tell Ben what happened and get him up here with plenty of help."

"What did happen?" McCready cut in. "The yarns don't hang together."

Ward was climbing into the saddle as he replied, "I told our Mex friend the truth. It was Burnside. Now I've got to get going if I'm going to have a chance on this scheme of mine."

Kirk howled a question after him but Ward did not pause to reply. He was on his way up the canyon at a gallop. Daylight was fading rapidly and he knew that it was going to be a close race against time—and against the chance that the Ortega riders would follow the trail too rapidly for his calculation.

It did not take long to reach the falls and once there he turned his horse loose. Then he started the treacherous climb, his rifle slung across his back.

His leg ached badly as he pulled himself up over the ledges, and the pain brought something of discouragement. He was taking a lot of long chances now, pitting his own guessing ability against a great many unknown factors. He knew that Burnside and Perrine had used a hideout in one of the short canyons above the falls, making it their headquarters during their first attempts at locating the Maximilian gold. They had no way of knowing that the spot was known to anyone else, so it seemed fairly certain that they might try to use it now. On that count he had told Ortega the literal truth. What he now counted on was that the Ortega riders would not be able to follow the trail in the growing dusk. For Ward's purpose the Ortega gang had to be nearby as a threat but he didn't plan to let them jump the other pair until after he had been able to make a few moves of his own.

Dusk was closing down rapidly when he reached the spot where he had been bushwhacked earlier in the day. He paused to catch his breath and take a bearing on the upper slopes. Not having visited the present objective of his march for some months he didn't want to make any mistakes and get lost in the darkness. That was for Ortega and his men.

Then he climbed again, following the upper stream for a little distance but then laboring up a steep slope where the mountain broke into a series of steep draws which made the going pretty rough for a man with a lame leg. There was an easier trail farther east but Ward did not want to use it. That would be the back trail Perrine and Burnside would be watching.

He was feeling reasonably well pleased with himself when he made the summit without any major disaster, but then he saw the rising moon and knew that he had miscalculated. With the moon a little better than half full it would offer early evening light that might permit Ortega's men to follow the trail left by Perrine and Burnside. In that case the Mexicans might reach the box canyon during the night, a circumstance Ward had hoped would not occur. His original idea had been to put the Ortega party in position to become active at dawn, giving him the night to get in his work first.

"Might have known," he grumbled to himself. Yet he knew that the basic idea had been a good one, perhaps was still good. After all, moonlight was pretty tricky for tracking purposes. Maybe the Ortega men would lose the trail

and have to wait for dawn. Not that there was any choice in the matter now; he had to go ahead and hope that he could carry out his hastily formed plan for the rescue of Marion Henninger.

It was easy to find his way with the moon brightening the mountains and within a matter of twenty minutes he was slipping over the summit of a small shoulder of the mountain, looking for a path which he knew was there, a path which perhaps even Burnside and Perrine didn't know existed.

He found it quickly enough, his quick ear telling him that somewhere in the darkness of the small canyon below he would find the two men and their prisoner. Voices drifted up to him quite clearly. Obviously they did not have any suspicion that pursuit should have formed in such a hurry. Or perhaps they didn't believe that anyone would know where to look for them.

The canyon was a small, blind-alley affair that opened into the bulk of the mountain from the southwest. Its mouth was well screened by timber and the blind end was steep, apparently really blind. Ward knew that there was a crooked but fairly safe descent behind the thicket which hid the blind end and which would permit him to get into the dead end behind the men who would be watching the screen of timber to the south. There was one trouble with this particular entrance to the little box canyon; the last part of it ended in a sheer drop of about ten feet. It was a good entrance but there would be no exit there. He had to surprise his men, release the girl after disposing of her captors, and then get out before the Ortega riders could find the spot. Once it had seemed like a smart plan but the moonlight was making it seem a lot more risky. Not only would it be more difficult to surprise his enemies but there was the extra chance that the Ortega riders would find their way to the spot too soon.

He worked his way down the steep cut in the mountain, knowing that this was really a dry wash that in spring accommodated the over-supply of melting snow which might one day become a part of his water plan. Now it was simply a steep creek bed which represented the danger of loose rocks and gravel betraying his movements. The voices sounded closer now and he knew that they might hear his movements

as easily as he could hear their voices. Several times he stopped to listen and to make sure of his next footing, each time knowing that he listened to Bull Perrine. He did not hear the voices of Burnside or Marion Henninger. He could not overhear the actual words nor even be reasonably certain of the tone.

Finally he made the drop to the level of the canyon, waiting in a crouch until the injured leg stopped paining and listening for any sign that he had been heard. Perrine's voice was only a grumble by that time and it continued undisturbed so Ward assumed that he had not been as noisy as he thought himself. Then he worked his way through the scrub timber which choked the blind end of the gulch, seeing the wink of a small fire through the trees. The rascally pair must be confident of themselves if they didn't hesitate to light a fire.

The realization made him all the more conscious of his own bad strategy. The plan had come fully formed into his mind on learning of the kidnapping of Marion Henninger. He had kept it in his thoughts when he told his half-truths to Ortega. Now he faced the grim facts. He had to recognize that he had deliberately dropped into a trap from which there was no retreat. He had made his gamble on the proposition that he could surprise the enemy, rescue the girl, and get away before Ortega could find his way to the spot. Now time was working against him. It had been a mistake to try for that extra smartness which would have let Ortega catch up with the other pair after it was too late for either of them to do much.

He shrugged lightly in the darkness. So he had made a mistake! Maybe it wouldn't hurt much. Ortega would still be delayed; no man could track very rapidly in moonlight. It could still work out all right.

Working cautiously he moved out into a clearer area. Now he could see the old camp that he had studied years ago as a mere matter of interest. Then he had been simply curious as to its advantages for the men who had once holed up there. Now he studied it for its weakness as a present target for attack.

Perrine loomed dark against the tiny glow of the fire. The big man was sitting in an untidy heap, eating something out of a pan. He seemed to be addressing a shadow on the near side of the fire. Ward caught a few words and moved closer

to hear it more completely. Then he understood what was happening. Marion was still tied up, a prisoner on the ground by the fire. Burnside had gone back down the mountain a short distance to make certain that there had been no immediate pursuit and Perrine was trying to persuade the girl that she should tell all about the mysterious map while Burnside was absent. His promises and threats were equally vague and Ward chuckled dryly in the night. Perrine was so anxious to double-cross his partner that he wasn't talking with much sense.

The chuckle was a brief one, since Ward's cold anger made it difficult for him to be much amused at anything connected with Perrine. He slipped through the pines which fringed one wall of the canyon, keeping well under cover but closing in rapidly enough so that the talk came very clearly.

"Yuh might as well come through first as last," Bull persisted. "I'm promisin' to treat yuh right. Burnside won't offer nothin' but some real nasty business if'n yuh don't do like he says. He's mean, that Burnside!"

"And you're a perfect gentleman, of course," Marion's voice stated acidly from the shadowy bundle. "How touching!"

"Hell, sister, I ain't so bad. You and me, we could . . . that is, I'd fix things. Aw, come on. Tell me where it is and we'll git outa here before Hellsfire comes back."

Her voice was quietly firm, almost expressionless but very precise as she said, "I have no map. I never saw a map. You might as well believe me."

"Now yuh're gittin' stubborn again, dammit. I ain't that easy to fool. Yer old man had a map. It wasn't on him. Nobody else but you could have it."

"You admit you killed my father?"

"No; I told yuh that a dozen times. I never touched him. I jest happen to know that the killer couldn't find no map on him. Stop bein' so damned suspicious of me; I'm yuhr best chance fer gittin' outa this."

Ward was within a dozen strides of the fire now, trying to estimate how much closer he might get before launching his attack. The onslaught would have to be a risk, he knew, with Burnside an unknown distance away. He had to keep Perrine from firing any shots that might bring Burnside or serve as a guide to the Ortega riders.

Marion Henninger let the sarcasm show in her tone as she snapped, "How stupid do you think I am? You kidnap me. You keep me tied up in this horribly cramped position. You offer to betray your partner if I'll deal with you alone. And you think I should have no suspicions of you! I wouldn't take a chance even if I had this map you babble about—and I don't!"

Ward liked the sound of the voice. The girl had been roughly treated, he assumed, but she didn't seem to have suffered any serious injury. Certainly she still managed to show plenty of spirit. He could see her quite plainly now, lying on her side with both hands bound together in front of her. Aside from the fact that her hair had fallen loose around her face she seemed pretty normal, almost as though she had lain down there to rest.

Suddenly she gave a little gasp. It was quickly smothered and she promptly launched into a further tirade against Perrine's treacherous nature, talking so volubly that the big man simply stood and stared down at her, not quite knowing how to take this sudden burst of talk. Ward understood—or thought he did. The girl had seen him creeping close and was talking to distract Perrine's attention.

He knew a moment of admiration for her quick wits and then he was hurling himself through the air in a spring which hurt his bad leg abominably. Perrine heard him and half turned to meet the attack, the move causing Ward to miss the blow that had been calculated to knock his man out. He heard Bull grunt and then a hard elbow came around to knock a good part of the wind out of him.

He faltered a little, almost dropping as he came down on the lame leg and found that it didn't want to support his weight. Perrine swore and bored in, connecting with a hard right swing before Ward could gather himself for a recovery. Mostly the smaller man knew only a swift anger at himself. He had blundered again. Instead of the swift, silent attack which had been necessary he had gotten himself into a fight in which he was over-matched.

A second blow struck him hard in the face and he went over backward, the sore leg buckling under him as he tried to give ground. Perrine started to follow up his advantage but suddenly he staggered and sprawled forward. Ward saw only the latter part of the move and he took quick advantage, rolling to avoid the other man's hurtling body and bringing around a

vicious smash with his six-gun. The weapon crashed against the side of Bull's skull just as the big fellow hit the ground. There was a roar of pain but then Ward was in a half crouch, swinging the gun again with much better leverage. This time there was not even a grunt from Perrine. A Colt revolver used as a hammer could dent even such a skull as Bull's.

"Cut me loose," Marion's voice urged quickly. "We must hurry."

Ward used his jack-knife carefully and stood back while she chafed the cramped wrists. "You all right?" he asked.

"Better than you, I imagine," she replied quietly. "I saw a couple of those blows you received."

"My head is still spinning. Lucky he didn't get in with that last lunge."

"Lucky my eye!" she retorted inelegantly. "That was sheer skill. I stuck a foot between his legs as he started to jump on you."

He grinned in spite of the way his mouth hurt from Perrine's blow. "Go ahead and brag," he told her. "I wondered what made him tumble like that."

"Save the cheers," she told him. "You can applaud me later. Let's get away before Burnside returns."

There was a small quiver in her voice as she uttered the final words and he knew that she was putting on this show of briskness to cover the emotions that she had to fight down. The death of her father and her own mistreatment were taking their toll but she was trying to maintain her poise with a false show of heartiness.

"I'm surprised you don't want to stay and ambush him," Ward told her. "Maybe you could trip him like you did Bull." He had stooped to hog-tie the big man with the dirty bandana he had taken from Perrine's neck.

"Burnside can wait," she said shortly. "I want to see that the murderer of my father is apprehended."

"I heard you accuse Bull."

"I was just talking. I think he told me the truth earlier when he explained about seeing those Mexicans leave the canyon. I think they tried to get this map everybody seems to be talking about. Somehow Perrine and Burnside learned that their dirty business failed to achieve its purpose—so I was kidnapped as being the second best chance for somebody to find treasure."

"Serious mistake," he told her, drawing back from the dying

fire and moving toward the screen of pines along the canyon wall. "You should never believe Bull Perrine, especially when he sounds the most honest. Ortega's men never were near your father. Burnside murdered him."

She stood very still in the gloom. "You are sure of this?" she asked.

"Reasonably. Want me to explain?"

"Please." Her tone hinted at an increasing effort at restraint but now it was anger rather than hysteria that she was trying to control. "I want to know the truth. Then I'll know what I have to do."

He repressed the smile that wanted to come. The girl insisted on talking and thinking as though she were still in civilization. Even the rough handling she had so recently suffered had not made her realize that her father's murder was not something to be handled in the regular channels of the law.

"Burnside was the murderer," he said shortly. "I should have known it at once. It took a couple of odd remarks for me to wake up."

"What do you mean?"

"The missing pants. You'll remember that it didn't seem to make any sense that they should be missing? Obviously there was a reason. I couldn't think what it was. Now I believe that I know."

"Please explain." She shivered a little as she added, "Then I want to start right out to meet that man. I'll shoot him myself if necessary."

"Nice idea," he agreed, "but you don't know about the other thing that has happened. Ortega's closing in. If we shoot it out with Burnside we'll be in a worse mess."

"But what's wrong with Ortega? If Burnside is the guilty man we shouldn't—"

A not-too-distant gunshot interrupted her. Ward stood erect, listening intently. A second shot sounded. Then a third. Finally a couple of long yells came to his ears.

"Too late," he muttered. "The moonlight let them come along too fast. Now Burnside has been foolish enough to take a shot at one of them. They'll have us trapped back here."

CHAPTER ❷ FIFTEEN

SUDDENLY MARION TURNED and ran back toward the fire. Ward started to follow, a word of warning on his lips, but then he saw what she was doing and halted, giving his leg a chance to stop aching. She needed only seconds and then she was back at his side carrying the gun she had dragged from the still unconscious Perrine's holster. "Perhaps I won't miss this time," she panted, her breathlessness as much a matter of excitement as exertion.

He wondered why she should think of that earlier incident at such a time but dismissed the thought with a reminder to himself that he had given up trying to understand her. The best way to do was to expect the unexpected from her. That always seemed to be the thing she did. "Back this way," he directed. "Maybe we can fool them yet."

"There's a way out on this side?"

"Not unless you've got a rope and know how to climb straight up. Here. Duck in behind this rock and I'll explain."

They slipped in behind a huge chunk of granite which must have broken from the canyon wall in some ancient upheaval of the land, maybe even in that glacial age Professor Henninger had made theories about. It occurred to Ward that it might be a long time before some other geologist would stick to his subject long enough to investigate those theories.

"This canyon's blind to the north—behind us," he told her in a whisper as they rested against the rock. "But nobody knows that we're in here. Perrine's unconscious and won't know what we did after he got knocked out. Burnside can only guess. The Ortega men won't even know that I'm here."

If this turns out to be a real battle between our two lots of enemies they may never get around to learning the truth about us. I'm hoping it will work that way."

"Are you sure you didn't plan it that way?" she asked dryly.

He chuckled. "Thanks. I'm beginning to think you actually give me credit for doing some thinking. However, I'll admit I made a whole flock of miscalculations. I wanted the Ortega crowd to hit this canyon at dawn tomorrow—after I had personally played the boy hero and rescued you from the first team of villains."

"Don't sound so glum about it. I've been rescued, haven't I?"

"For the moment. But we're not out of the woods yet. As a matter of cold, hard fact we're not even out of the canyon. Listen!"

A horse was coming fast up the grade into the gulch, at least two other horses not far behind. Ward made his guess aloud. "I think Burnside must have cut down one of Ortega's scouts but now the rest of the gang are hard on his tail. Maybe we'll see some excitement yet—the kind we can enjoy from a safe distance, I hope."

By that time the little fire had died away to nothing but a few red embers, but the moon was now peering down from such an angle that the canyon was reasonably light. Neither of them had any trouble in recognizing Hellsfire Burnside when he came pelting into the little clearing, his tinny voice yelling the alarm to his burly partner—who still lay in an untidy heap by the fire's embers.

In a way it was amusing to listen to the little man's frantic curses. At first he seemed to think that Perrine was drunk. Then he discovered that the girl was missing and that Bull's gun was gone. At that point a gun boomed from the brush of the lower end of the canyon.

Burnside was as quick as his reputation. He fired, apparently at the flash, the two shots coming so close together that it seemed as though the gunman might have been waiting for that first blast.

"Good man with a gun," Ward muttered. "He'll be tough to get."

The brisk exchange of shots became a sporadic sniping, the watchers aware of only the shadows now. Burnside had

stamped out the embers so that now the moonlight was the only source of light. Ward guessed that the Ortega men were trying to creep close along the shadowy walls but he had a notion that they would be plenty careful. Certainly they must be aware of the Burnside reputation.

Then a small stir and a mutter of voices hinted that Perrine had recovered consciousness. Marion's lips were close to Ward's ear as she whispered, "Now they'll know about us."

"Maybe not. They've got other things to do than to figure out what kind of move we might have made. Quite a problem for our good friends, I think."

"I almost sympathize," she replied. "I'm pretty much in the dark myself. You haven't told me a thing."

"Time for that later. Just remember that neither lot of our embattled chums wants to let us get out of here alive. This is sort of an elimination bout, you might say. We have to take on the survivors. Just hope there won't be too many of them."

They were silent then, listening to the ominous sounds from ahead of them. For the moment they were in no particular danger although flying lead could always be a threat. Ward was content to let things stand; his only concern was that they might be discovered behind the rock by an Ortega gunman trying to flank the camp. That would complicate matters.

The minutes dragged after that. Occasionally a gunshot would sound when one of the outlaws spotted a movement in a shadow—or thought he did. Then there would be a hammering of explosions as opposing men fired at the first flash. It was becoming quite clear that the camp was being invested, each flurry of fire more of a close-range proposition than the preceding one. Ward decided that there were now four attackers, and therefore that one of the vaqueros had apparently fallen victim to that earlier fighting down the gulch. He also knew that Perrine must have had a spare gun because two weapons were showing from the defense lines.

He risked a whisper to tell Marion and she murmured, "How long will it last?"

"Not long. Ortega thinks I'm behind him somewhere, probably getting help. He won't want a delay that will let me catch up."

She started to ask another question, obviously annoyed because she did not know enough facts to understand his reasoning, but then a new burst of firing shattered the moonlit night.

"This could be it," Ward hissed. "They'll make their big attack now!"

He could almost see what was happening as he watched the pattern of gun flashes. A couple of Ortega shots had drawn defense fire, letting the attackers know the location of the defenders. With that much of a hint the Ortega men had started in at a run, blasting away as they charged. This was it, Ward thought, a grim triumph in the thought. With any luck he might expect the two lots of enemies to wipe each other out. It would be simple justice—and very convenient.

Guns boomed and men grunted. A single scream of pain broke off in mid-breath. Perrine's voice started a hoarse cursing. Somebody shouted frantically in Spanish. They were blasting away at close range now, and the attack no longer had any pattern at all.

Then it broke. One of the defenders had started to pull back, his retreat taking him directly toward the rock where Ward and the girl crouched. Instantly Ward pulled her down out of the line of fire. "Stay down!" he snapped, not bothering to whisper now. "Let me handle this."

He could see the lurching figure coming toward him but now the gunfire seemed to break off. Everybody reloading at the same time, he thought. The interval allowed the retreating man to dive into cover only a dozen feet from the big rock. At the same time a voice called a soft query in Spanish. The attackers were getting ready to close in.

They did it quietly, probably moving as they reloaded, and then the firing started again. Ward heard the nearer man grunt in pain and then he saw two dark forms running forward.

The man on the ground fired once, wildly this time, and one of the attackers drove in a shot which brought another grunt. At that point Ward took a hand. He fired once with deliberation, sighting as carefully as the dim light would permit. Then he blasted hard at the other attacker, depending on the surprise and fury of his attack to prevent the other man from getting in a reply.

He emptied his gun and knew that he had not missed. Marion's voice came sharply and he realized that she had

risen to stand beside him. "Take this one. I don't shoot so well."

He took the extra Colt and snapped, "Get down!"

She obeyed but for several minutes it seemed as though the precaution had not been necessary. The rocky little canyon was completely silent.

Ward was not taking any unnecessary chances. It was too easy to remember that he had made some bad guesses. He didn't propose to guess wrong now, not with the possibility that one of these notably treacherous enemies might still be lying low and waiting for a chance to fire a malicious shot. He could wait. The pressure was on the others now—if any of them remained alive.

Marion seemed to read his thoughts. Her voice came quietly from just below his shoulder. "Keep watch. I'll get bullets from your belt and reload this gun."

He chuckled in spite of his weariness and tension. "You're a real handy gal to have around, sis. Is this the kind of thinking they taught you to do in college?"

"I'm learning all the time," she replied. "And please stand still. I'm not very good at this job, particularly in the dark."

Perrine's hoarse growl cut in then. It was almost a whine and Ward knew that the big man must be hard hit. "That you back there, Owen?"

"Sure. Who else?"

"Give me a hand, will yuh? I stopped a couple. Kinda bad."

The fingers that were working at Ward's belt suddenly became firm hands at his shirt. "Wait," the girl whispered softly. "Don't move."

He held his position, realizing that she had stooped down to pick up something from the ground. Then he knew what she was doing. She had picked up a rock and was rolling it out along the ground into the open space beyond their impromptu fort. The rock bounced twice and then a gun slammed. Perrine had made a final effort.

Ward reached over to squeeze the girl's arm. "Thanks," he said. "You learn fast—lucky for me."

Another gun blasted then from a greater distance and Ward fired at the second flash. Then the quiet came down again. Perrine's attempted treachery had been countered by another bit of the same.

"Nice people in your circle of friends," Marion murmured.

"They used to be," Ward told her.

Again they waited with nothing but the silence coming to their ears. Finally Ward called, "Want to try another shot, Bull?"

No answer. He could see the dark shadow on the ground but it had not moved since that last exchange of shots. Nor had there been the tiniest tick of movement anywhere else in the canyon. That was when Marion began to cry. Ward let her have it out. She was entitled to it.

The minutes passed and Ward became uneasily aware that he had been standing on one leg for a long time, the injured one partly numb but still aching. There was still no sign of life across the little battlefield and reason told him that if any of the combatants remained alive there would be scant danger of an additional attack. No one would dare to make a move—for exactly the same reason that Ward was not risking any exploration. There was still too much risk of drawing a shot from some desperate thug.

He sank down beside the girl, pulling the bad leg up so that he could test it with his fingers. It was bloody again but he didn't think the bleeding had been dangerous.

Marion did not speak for a long time but finally she said, "They gave me some very rough treatment but it wasn't as bad as I was afraid it was going to be. I'll do all right."

"Want to tell me about it?"

"There's little to tell. I was thrown across the back of a horse like a sack of meal and it was rather painful while it lasted. Then Perrine took me in front of him on his horse. It was physically a bit more comfortable but I didn't like it any better. That's about all there is to tell—I'm glad to say."

"How long were you here before I came along?"

"Maybe a half hour. At first they tried to make me talk, promising and threatening. I pretended to faint. After a while Burnside became disgusted and I thought he might do something really bad." She paused a moment or two before adding, "I suppose I can thank Perrine for the delay that followed. He pretended to be nervous about possible pursuit. I didn't know that he was persuading Burnside to go scouting in order that he might try a double-cross."

"I'm surprised that Burnside fell for it. They've been together long enough to know that neither could trust the other."

"Anyway, you know about what happened after that. I never was so relieved in my life as when I saw you sneaking up behind that awful ape."

"Imagine!" he exclaimed. "Ward was welcome! When did that ever happen before?"

"Don't be bitter. I'll take back all of the nasty things I ever said to you if you'll just explain some of the things that I need to know. How did you find me? Where is this map they talked about? How do you know that it was Burnside who murdered my father? What were these Ortega people trying to do?"

He settled himself comfortably, pleasantly conscious of the warmth of her body against him. Maybe this was a funny time to be making friends with a scholarly young woman but he was in no mood to be critical. And it might help to curb her restlessness if he got the talking out of his system.

"I'll tell it my way. The questions will mostly get answered in the process."

"No you don't! I've had a sample of your stories. You dragged that treasure yarn out all one morning. Tell me about my father."

He nodded agreement, sensing her real seriousness behind the show of humor. That much he must explain quickly, as painlessly as possible. "It was the matter of the missing pants," he said quietly. "I knew that the murderer must be a small man, the footprints making it certain, but it never occurred to me that the mystery of the burned levis tied up with that fact. I was still trying to guess whether the guilty man was Burnside or one of the vaqueros when I suddenly got a hunch. Those missing pants had been burned carefully, deliberately, by a man who must have been in a hurry. It had to mean something."

"Of course. But what?"

"I think—and please forgive me if I seem callous about your feelings—that the killer got blood on his own pants when he was trying to beat the secret of the treasure map out of your father. He wanted to appear somewhere in an innocent guise and he couldn't afford to have anyone find him with blood on him. So he simply exchanged pants with his victim. It was the murderer's blood-stained pants, that were burned so carefully in that fire."

"But I still don't . . ."

"But don't you see, none of the Mexicans wore levis. They

were wearing those black outfits. The only man who could have taken your father's levis and made them appear as his own was Burnside. Perrine was too big. The Mexicans wore a different kind of pants."

"I understand." She was fighting to keep her voice under control, probably because she was picturing in her mind that fatal scene in the other gorge.

Ward went on quickly, trying to spare her. "So Burnside had good reason to know that there was no map found by the murderer of Professor Henninger. And Perrine knew because Burnside would have told him. I think the watchers from the opposite rim of the canyon must have seen enough to know what was happening. That's why the Ortega crowd suddenly decided to take a hand; they didn't want Perrine and Burnside to get the jump on them in any race for the treasure."

She was silent then and Ward supposed that she was fighting to control her emotions. It could not have been easy for her to hear this discussion of her father's murder. He settled himself as comfortably as possible, content to let her do her own thinking while he gave way to the weariness that had just now begun to make itself felt. Time enough to fill in the rest of the story when she asked for it.

Once she moved as though to pull away from him but then he felt the warm curves of her body against him once more. It was then that he heard the altered tempo in her breathing that told him she had gone to sleep. Even granting that she was nearing exhaustion, both physical and emotional, it was something of a shock to know that she could let the tension drain away so that sleep could come.

"Might have known," he muttered under his breath. "Anything I don't expect. That's what she does."

He wasn't a bit annoyed about it. He couldn't match her slumbers but it was still pleasant to lie there and rest in such good company.

CHAPTER ❖ SIXTEEN

WARD FOUGHT HIS WAY to wakefulness without quite knowing what he was doing. He was conscious of a lot of physical discomfort and his eyes almost refused to open. Only his half-wakened mind told him that he had to do something. Probably the sensation lasted for a fraction of a second but, like a dream, seemed to drag on endlessly so that he stirred himself with a sort of desperation as though the thing he had to do was something he had been avoiding for years. Then he opened his eyes to a sort of yellow haze and was more confused than ever.

Before he could sort out his various impressions the yellow haze tickled his nose and he sneezed. That did it. He came wide awake as the girl in his arms turned to face him.

"Oh!" she gasped. "We've slept. It's morning and we've been . . ."

"Sorry," he murmured. "Your hair tickled my nose."

She pulled away then, a flush coming to cheeks that were both dirty and scratched. He knew that she was embarrassed at finding herself sleeping in his arms but he didn't try to spare her feelings on that score. Instead he sat up, rubbing the arm which had been beneath her head. "I'm of a divided mind about you, sis," he confided. "You don't snore but you sure do put cramps in an arm."

"Why didn't you wake me?"

He chuckled. "To be perfectly honest—I just woke up myself. I guess we both needed the sleep. Stay quiet for a minute or two and I'll have a look around."

It was not quite full daylight but there was plenty of light

for him to see that the canyon was quiet. Except for a pair of birds flitting across from one rock wall to the other there was no movement. He studied the brush for several minutes and then took a sharper look at the sprawled figures closer at hand. Marion disobeyed orders to rise beside him, groaning a little as stiffened muscles shouted their protest.

"Sore?" he asked.

"Terribly. That horse was awfully hard, especially the way I had to ride him." Her voice changed swiftly as she looked out and saw the dead men. "Are they really dead?" There was shock in the tone as though she had suddenly realized that she had been sleeping so close to death.

"I'm depending on it," he told her grimly. "Stay behind the rock and keep a gun handy. I'm going to have a look, if my game leg will hold out."

It did not take long, even at the slow pace he had to travel, for him to discover that there were no survivors of the night's battle. He found four dead Mexicans including the man he still thought of as Ortega although now he was sure that the real Pablo Ortega had never come into the picture at all. Two of them had died within a dozen paces of Hellsfire Burnside, the other pair meeting the same fate in their attempt to finish off Perrine. Burnside had been hit by three bullets while Perrine had suffered three wounds before the one that had killed him. It was a gory scene but Ward didn't waste any time on sympathy. The world was well off without this particular collection of outlaws.

He turned to wave a signal of reassurance to Marion and then stooped over the body of Burnside, bringing out his knife as he did so. He knew a small revulsion at moving the little gunman's body but there was an idea he wanted to prove or disprove while the opportunity presented itself.

"What are you going to do?" the girl called hastily.

He glanced up in surprise, baffled for a moment by the look of horror in her tired eyes. Then he understood. "Relax," he advised. "I got out of the scalping habit years ago. I'm playing a hunch."

She swallowed hard but managed to say, "Sorry. I should have known you wouldn't . . ."

"Take a look. Could these levis be your father's?"

"I suppose so. I'm not sure." It was clear that she was having some trouble in getting her nerves settled. Ward didn't

blame her; he wasn't feeling too good himself. Those hard blows he had taken from Bull Perrine had left him sore and spent. Or maybe he was just more sore and spent than he had been before.

He ran his fingers along the waistband of the faded levis, turning the dead man over gingerly to complete the examination. When he found some odd stitching he went to work with the knife, ripping out enough of a seam to let him get his fingers on a folded bit of paper.

"The map?" Marion asked quietly.

"You knew?"

"No. I never knew there was such a thing. It just seems to be the reasonable assumption. Now can we get away from here before I—get ill?"

He straightened up, fighting the dizziness that kept driving at him. "Afraid not. I think . . . I think I'm going to beat you to it. Getting ill, I mean."

She hurried across to pick up a canteen which lay beside the gear that had been dropped in the little camp. A swallow of the tepid water made Ward feel a little better and he managed to propose, "Let's move over there along that far wall. Away from these." He gestured toward the dead men. "Pretty soon we ought to have some help coming, and we'll be safer there if that other Mex is still alive and ornery."

She helped him over to the shelter of some trees and he sank to the ground, silent for a while. Then he glanced at the scrap of paper and handed it to her. "Souvenir," he said shortly.

"No more than that?" She was studying it as she asked the question.

"No more than that. I've seen three copies just like it. I suppose every romantic idiot who ever finds one of them in the future will think that he has found the missing clue that no one else ever found."

"As my father did?"

He nodded. "I'm afraid so."

Again there was a long silence before the girl murmured, "It's an odd thing to think about but my father and Professor Giles died for exactly opposite reasons. Professor Giles was killed because he refused to compromise with his ideals. My father died when he let something interfere with those ideals."

Ward did not reply. It was easy to see how others had made their mistakes. It was even pretty easy to look back on one's

own. One way or another it always seemed to be a matter of looking back—and that didn't do anything for a man's future.

A distant shout interrupted his thoughts and he forced himself to a different line of thinking. "Company coming," he said wearily. "You can tell them what happened. I'm bone tired."

"Just a minute, mister. I think you're putting the chore on me so I'll have something to do that will keep me from getting emotional. Just like you played sick and made me buck up to take care of you a few minutes ago."

He grinned. "It worked, didn't it?"

"You fraud!"

"But this time I mean it."

"Very well. What do I tell them?"

"About your father. That part you know. About the other, the man we called Ortega was really named Catron. I think he killed the real Ortega. He had a good scheme, to get both the valley and the treasure. I should have tumbled on to him a lot sooner than I did."

"But how did he . . . ?" She didn't finish the question. Ward had closed his eyes. He was even snoring lightly.

When he thought about it later Ward didn't believe that he had really blacked out. The weariness and pain had simply exhausted his already spent energies. Sleep fastened itself upon him so firmly that he couldn't fight it. Nor did he want to.

He knew when a half dozen riders came into the canyon. He knew that they were taking charge, asking questions of Marion Henninger and at the same time getting a dozen dirty jobs done. Later he knew that he was being carried from a horse to a wagon and still later he realized that he was back in that same bed at Hawksley's. He wondered whether he had any clothes on this time but he wasn't interested enough to put his hands under the covers to find out. What difference did it make?

When he really opened his eyes to full consciousness he felt pretty good. There was a sore spot on his forehead and the old injury still ached in his leg but the miserable weariness was gone. He could even offer a grin at the two women who sat near the foot of the bed. "Two beautiful nurses," he commented. "The reward of living a good clean life, I suppose."

"Oh dear!" Mrs. Hawksley complained. "He's normally idiotic again!"

Ward chuckled. "Among friends, I see. How long did I sleep?"

"Not long enough. It was peaceful with you out of the conversation market."

Marion broke in then to ask, "How do you feel?" There were still a couple of small scratches on her face but otherwise she showed no ill effects. The blue eyes were bright once more and the fair hair was again in neat braids. Ward recalled how it had spread across his face that morning in the canyon and knew a moment of regret.

"I'll live," he told her cheerfully. "You seem to have done all right. At least you look mighty good to me."

"Hear the man!" Mrs. Hawksley exclaimed. "That's the nearest thing to a gallant speech I've ever heard from him."

The blonde girl broke in again, with suspicious haste. "Perhaps you feel well enough to explain a few things," she proposed. "Mr. Hawksley has verified a part of what you told me back there in the mountains but we still do not understand the whole story."

"What part do you already know?"

"That you were right about this man Catron posing as Pablo Ortega. One of his men broke down and confessed—as soon as he was sure that neither Catron nor Gonzales remained alive to punish him for talking. It seems that this man Catron had gotten control of a small part of Mexico during the troubles down there. A sort of outlaw governor or something. One of his prisoners was Pablo Ortega. I don't know the details. Anyway the word came that someone was trying to locate Ortega in order to give him a big inheritance. Burnside was working with Catron at the time and he gave Catron quite a tale about the Ortega lands being the site of a buried treasure."

"So that's how Burnside got into the act!" Ward exclaimed. "I thought it had to be something like that but I couldn't be sure."

"That was it. Burnside and Catron planned to get control of the valley, partly for itself since they knew they had to get out of Mexico, and partly with the hope of having plenty of time to find the Maximilian gold. They tortured Ortega to learn as many facts as possible—although it appears that he knew little enough about the ancestral acres, if you like that phrase. Then Catron moved north to pass himself off as

Ortega while Burnside hurried up into Colorado to pick up his old partner Perrine."

"Which is how that precious pair happened to meet your outfit?"

"Exactly. Meanwhile Catron had found smooth sailing with his impersonation. He was accepted here without question. He had Ortega's few papers—and no one actually knew the real Ortega."

"And then he heard that a man named Ward had met the real Ortega? Right?"

"Right. When did you figure that out?"

"Much too late, I'm ashamed to say. As soon as I found out that somebody was trying hard to kill me I suspected Ortega. But I couldn't figure out why. Then he showed up at the sawmill with a big smile of friendship and the attacks stopped. Again I couldn't figure out why. Later it seemed easy. I'd made a statement in the hearing of Julio Gonzales to the effect that I did not actually know Pablo Ortega. When he passed that word along to Catron the attacks stopped. Catron didn't fear my recognition any longer. I was pretty stupid."

"I don't see why you say that."

"Because Ortega simply had to be a fake. He came to the valley with a sizeable crew and a herd of cattle. The real Ortega would have been down-and-out, ransomed from prison. Not only that but the man who called himself Ortega was obviously smart, pretty well educated and mighty sure of himself. The real Ortega was a small-time saddle bum. I should have spotted it in the first place."

"I'll accept your first statement," Norma Hawksley told him with her usual show of acidity. "You were stupid. Now go ahead and brag about how the great brain finally went to work."

He managed a wink that time. "You put things so sweetly! What started the great brain to work was a chance remark, relayed to me by Ed McCready. He mentioned Catron by name. I'd already recognized Julio Gonzales and knew that he had worked for Catron. I simply decided that Catron must be the man we'd been accepting as Ortega. It made all the little parts of the puzzle fit."

Marion took it up again. "So you tried to arrange everything so that Catron would catch up with Burnside when it

appeared that Burnside was trying to double-cross him."

"Correct. I thought I could get to the box canyon and get you out before Catron and his gunnies could arrive. The moon almost ruined the whole scheme. I'll never think of moonlight as romantic again."

"Did you ever?" Norma demanded.

Marion didn't let him reply. "What about the Apache raid?" she asked. "Was that Catron's idea also?"

"I think it was. That was where Gonzales came in. Gonzales was known along the border as a renegade who dealt with the Apaches. He sold them liquor and was reputed to be in their confidence. I imagine that Catron came up with the idea after he arrived here in the valley. He had two reasons for having Gonzales bring in a band of renegades. One was to drive settlers out of the valley so that he might ruin the settlement and foreclose on Ben and me. That would let him take title to the whole place and he was smart enough to know that it could be worth more than any unfound treasure. At first he tried to do the job with his own men and a lot of talk about the Dark Raiders. Then he decided that he had to get rid of me so he brought in Apaches, letting them do what he hadn't ordered his own gunmen to do. I was beginning to understand that part when I asked about the brandy. Not many people ever bribed Apaches with good brandy but Catron might have found it useful."

"You were right on that," Norma told him. "Salazar says that a considerable amount of the old brandy was taken from the cellar. He thought it was being given to the men at the line camp."

Ward sighed. "I guess that clears most of it up. I hope Ben has taken steps to let the story get out so new settlers will start coming. I'm going to need a lot of customers for my lumber."

Mrs. Hawksley stared at him suspiciously. "That doesn't sound like you. What makes you so ambitious all at once?"

"When a man has to support a wife he needs money."

"You mean—?"

"Naturally. After all, I spent the night in the mountains with a lady. It seems as though I ought to make an honest woman of her."

Mrs. Hawksley opened her mouth to state her opinion of this bit of impertinence but Ward beat her to the punch.

"Hoping she'll see it my way, of course. You know, Norma, I kinda took a liking to the girl after I got done being mad at her. She's real helpful in a tight spot. She's got good brains. She don't panic much when the going gets rough. And she's sorta cute—even when she has a dirty face. And she don't snore."

"How flattering!" Marion exclaimed. "Do I have anything to say about this?"

"Not a doggone thing. I've got it all figured out that we'll persuade Salazar that what he needs is somebody to occupy the hacienda for him while he gets busy with the rancho—and the stock Catron thoughtfully brought in for him. We can put on a lot of fancy airs and when you're not keeping me out of trouble you can get on with that work of yours. If it's legends you want to hear I can tell you plenty of them—evenings when we're resting."

"A very business-like proposition," the blonde girl said, matching his show of solemnity. "You make it sound—well, interesting."

"It's nonsense!" Norma Hawksley exploded. "Any man who would make a marriage proposal in terms like that ought to be punched right in the nose!"

"There's more," Ward told her pleasantly. "But I'm not going to let you in on it, my violent friend. If you'll kindly get the heck out of this room I think I might have a chance to do better."

The big woman's glare turned into a half embarrassed grin. Then she laughed aloud. "I hate to admit it—being as how I find it hard to give you credit for much of anything—but somehow I think you'll do all right."

Marion was coming toward him as Norma headed for the door. All three of them seemed content with the moves.

THE END
of an Original Gold Medal Novel by
E. E. Halleran



To the south of him, a horde of drunken Apaches, angry Apaches, rapidly moving north.

Ahead of him, the valley, beseiged by bandits on horseback.

And behind him, a life he couldn't possibly return to.

Ward hadn't any choice. But he was a man who had learned long ago to expect the worst in any situation, and the fact that he was now riding straight into hell couldn't make much difference.

