

**A Gunfire
WESTERN NOVEL**

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A HILLMAN PUBLICATION

*A Full Length
Western Novel*

*by
W. D. Hoffman*



**THE
RANGE
REBELLION**

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by **W. D. HOFFMAN**

When Menlo Dory and his friend Bill Wilcox retired from service with the state rangers, they both settled down on ranches, and forgot man-hunting in the interest of raising cattle.

The instinct of the ranger for dangerous work when life depends on the quickness of the draw, however, never quite left Menlo, and the spark was fanned into a flame when he received an urgent summons from Bill to join him in Arizona, where a range rebellion was brewing.

There was still another reason for Menlo's swift answer to his friend's call for aid. Bill suspected that Skag Garone was at the root of the trouble, and Menlo had an old debt to settle with that hombre.

A GUNFIRE WESTERN NOVEL that is packed with smashing, exciting drama.

Novel Selections Inc. New York

THE RANGE REBELLION

by W. D. Hoffman

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This Gunfire Western Novel represents an abridgement of the original to speed the action.

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MENLO DORY's piercing blue eyes scanned the towering buttes and pinnacles, rose-tinted with the sunrise, as the train sped westward through northern Arizona. Adventure, possibly death, beckoned beyond the serrated Santa Isabel range to the westward, he realized, from what his old friend Bill Wilcox had written in summoning him from his comfortable and peaceable Van Horn, Texas, ranch.

No one in the crowded Santa Fe day-coach would have taken the quiet, silent passenger for the implacable man-hunter of former days along the border of West Texas and Chihuahua, one variously called the Bloodhound by American outlaws, El Montero, the Hunter, by Mexican bandidos and ladrones, a fact which the young woman opposite him would, of course, not know.

She had a rather saucy, haughty air about her, Menlo Dory thought. He had been noticing her since she had boarded the train at Wingate, across the New Mexico line. He thought he had never seen a brighter, more intelligent or prettier face, and her apparel told that she, too, was of the cow-country. No word had been spoken until she had returned to him a slip of paper that the stiff, train-whipped breeze must have lifted from his vest pockets, when the Texan had said, "Thank you!" and she had nodded understandingly. And Menlo Dory had vented his curiosity:

"Bound Arizona way—ranch home near here?"

Again she nodded, pleasantly enough; but her manner told the Van Horn cattleman that she was not the easily familiar kind, and Menlo Dory was not the one to open himself to rebuff. Luckily, he concluded, she had not read the retrieved letter, but her glance might have picked up the signature. All cow-country people in this part of Arizona would know Bill Wilcox.

The Texan's mind reverted to Hidden Valley, Bill Wilcox, and the one called "Skag" Garone. It did not seem like seven years since Menlo and Bill were state rangers. Menlo the hated El Montero, whose familiarity with the habits of border smugglers and criminals generally had made him the target of their wrath. Only Skag Garone had ever worsted him.

It would be good to meet Skag again and to see the swift gunman face to face, in daylight. Menlo Dory had never seen the features of the outlaw; his only meeting had been in the near-darkness of Stanton Street, at the international bridge, after Menlo had joined the El Paso mounted police. Skag Garone, a slim little smudge in the darkness, had been quicker then, but Menlo Dory never admitted that conditions had been equal.

A shadow crossed the Texan's gaunt face. Garone was out here in

Arizona now, if Bill Wilcox's surmise was correct. That inducement alone would have brought El Montero back to the man-hunt trail. The seven years away from rangers and police, building up his herd on the range out of Van Horn, seemed almost unreal. Yet during that interval the Texan had been satisfied to forget his days of border warfare and attend to his cattle business, always with the thought that some day the killer Garone would cross his trail again. A week before, when Bill Wilcox pictured the need of Menlo Dory's help in warring against rustlers in Hidden Valley, Menlo had hesitated to go. Then had come the letter naming Garone.

Out of the tail of his eye from time to time as the train sped westward the Texan appraised the girl passenger, in riding skirt and wide range hat, blue shirt and pink neckerchief against a sun-tanned throat. Wherever she was going, there would be a horse awaiting her at the station, Menlo knew, from her outfit. Not lacking prettiness, she was striking in several ways—tall, of clean-cut, even features, radiating health, always in complete possession of herself. Once she gave the Texan a very searching look, not altogether friendly, which surprised the cowman.

The Van Horn man's hand sought the pocket of his soft gray shirt; he drew out the letter and read it for the fifth or sixth time:

Dear Menlo,

I haven't asked you outright to come, amigo, knowing you'd feel obligated for old times' sake and maybe sacrifice your business. We figured we could handle Lew Pardmore's bunch, but Bar W is in a jackpot and several men have been shot. Pardmore's Wagon Rod outfit has hired imported killers. If you take the notion, come by train to Chavez. See Carl Sands there—he'll have a horse for you. Bar W is eighteen miles south, but don't come there. Don't be in a hurry to see me, but ride out to Pardmore and see what you can learn. It's a range war now. One other thing—you recollect the time Skag Garone shot you in the shoulder and escaped? Unless I'm mistaken Skag is here with the Wagon Rod; leastwise he knows about the time Skag shot himself free from El Montero. Hoping you'll come,

Bill Wilcox

The Texan's face twitched; he remembered the incident as though it were yesterday. And Bill Wilcox had saved the life of the then officer when he arrived on the scene as Garone started shooting, causing the killer to flee. Menlo owed Bill Wilcox any favor he might ask. He did not dream Bill was in serious trouble when the Arizonan first invited him to Hidden Valley. Now there was the added incentive in the suspected presence of the border outlaw. Menlo Dory, ranchman, had tried

to live down the ferocious, somewhat unjust reputation as a man-hunting bloodhound. He was not as young as when a ranger and El Paso mounted officer. But Bill Wilcox's letter had roused in him the old smoldering fires of El Montero.

As the miles ripped by and the desert dust filtered through the coach from the heating terrain, Menlo tried to dismiss the cowgirl from mind; he produced his baggage ticket; Chavez was the next stop, on signal. His "warbag" was a lone gunnysack containing bridle, belt, gun and a change of clothing. He carried his saddle, and had the bag put off the coach.

When the train rumbled to a stop at the isolated train point of loading chutes and one frame building, the Texan swung down from the coach step. He started forward to get his baggage, when he saw the girl leaving the train. She, too, was making sure that a trunk was put off. The cars moved on.

"Your range?" he asked her in surprise, noting they were alone.

She nodded curtly. "You'll find the Bar W—Bill Wilcox's outfit—eighteen miles south, on the left-hand trail." She turned toward the store building and livery, leaving her trunk on the desert sand, while Menlo gazed after her, his eyes a little troubled at what she had learned.

2

SINCE he had never seen the girl before she boarded the train at Wingate that morning, the only conclusion was that her quick eye had noted part of the contents of the fallen letter, if only the Bill Wilcox signature.

The Texan let his gunnysack baggage lie untouched as he gazed after her retreating figure. She was moving with swift, supple stride, her tan boots shining beneath the whipping folds of her riding skirt, carrying her to the low frame building a hundred yards from the railroad track. Menlo saw a whiskered personage emerge from the doorway, and knew from Wilcox's letter he must be Carl Sands, keeper of the supply store and corrals. At a word from the girl, Sands came forward, stooped and lifted her light trunk to his broad back, and carried it to the horse shed on one side of the building. The girl had gone into the shed and was saddling a waiting pony.

Menlo Dory drew his belt and holstered gun from the gunnysack, strapped it on and, lifting the saddle, started for the store. The trader came out to meet him.

"I'll need a horse," said the Texan, extending his hand. "You're Mr. Sands?"

"Yessir."

"Name's Menlo Dory. How far to the Wagon Rod outfit?"

"Menlo Dory," repeated Sands, scrutinizing the Texan for a long period, taking his hand. He hummed a drawling melody as though to himself, then slowly: "So yo're him—yore Menlo Dory, and no mistake! Wagon Rod is seven miles southwest. Level stretch on this mesa for three mile; then the mesa jumps off into Hidden Valley. Come in." He motioned the visitor inside, poured out drinks. "I'm Bill Wilcox's friend, but neutral. Know how to keep my mouth shut, Mister Dory! Bill rode in yesterday. Expectin' you today. Your instructions is to hook up with Wagon Rod—Lew Pardmore's—as a hand. If they won't take you, go to Bar W and see Bill, other side of the valley. But if Pardmore takes you, stick there couple weeks, don't try to see Bill a-tall, but keep yore ears open. Pardmore and Bill is at war, I reckon you know."

"At war, eh?" Menlo was not averse to receiving information from this self-professed close-mouthed Carl Sands. He did not like the idea that Bill Wilcox should have confided in him the plans he had outlined, but perhaps Sands was a man who could be trusted.

"Been trouble for a month," Sands informed him. "Growin' out of an old dispute over 'Dobe Ruins strip. Call 'em 'Dobe Tombs now, since the killin's. Couple shot, both sides. That's why Bill sent for you, Mister Dory! Been a lot of other gunners come in here five weeks."

The Texan's jaws lumped. He did not like to be taken for a hired gunman.

Sands corrected the impression. "Yo're an old-time friend of Bill, ain't you?"

The cowman nodded. "Where'll I find that horse?"

The trader led the way out toward the corrals. "Been some rustlin' hereabouts, too. Both sides. Outfits all ships from Chavez here. Roundup will fill these pens in a couple weeks. Ranger is the big town, below Wagon Rod and Bar W. Wonderful country this, if it wasn't for them two outfits startin' war—"

"Mr. Sands, who's the young lady?" Menlo's eye had caught the figure of the girl coming from the corral, riding.

Before the whiskered one could answer, she dashed up.

"I'll send for the trunk, Mr. Sands." She turned the pony. "Oh, I've forgotten something!" She loped back.

"Close-mouthed." Carl Sands grinned at Menlo. "She's a Pardmore—Lew's datter. Mighty fine lady. Good lookin'—smart as whip. A ketch for somebody. Hidden Valley's proud of Jean; even if she is a Wagon Rod. Doggone shame, this war. Her dad means well enough—think's he's right. Bill's got the law on his side on that disputed ground, though. I'm for Bill but I got sense enough to say nothin'—"

The girl again spurted up, addressed Sands. "I'll go on," she said tersely. "I'll meet the boys on the Wagon Rod trail."

"Better wait, Miss Jean," advised the trader. "They was comin' to meet you, but something has delayed 'em. Better wait."

"No, I'll go on." She turned her mount.

Menlo Dory spoke up deferentially: "If it's agreeable, Miss—Pardmore—I'm heading your way, and will ride with you."

"You going *my* way?" she asked quickly.

"For the Wagon Rod." The cowman had taken a long chance. If he was to join Pardmore's outfit, there would be no hiding the fact later; he might as well let her know now. If she had read enough of the contents of the letter to know his purpose and defeat it, the sooner the better.

"Thank you." Her tone was quiet, revealing no suspicion, but firm. "It will not be necessary for you to go with me. I know the trail." She spurred from the long frame building and rode southwest, at a steady lope.

Sands chuckled deep in his breast. "She's high-spirited, like her dad. Resents strangers comin' to this range, even the ones Lew hires. Suspicious as git out. I was hopin' she'd take a likin' to you—makin' it easier for you to git on the Rod. You'll have to argy a mite to git Lew or that foreman of hisn, Pete York, to hire you. But them's Bill's instructions. Your hoss is in the corral; take your pick."

Menlo Dory thanked him, hurried to the enclosure, used his rope and saddled. Within a few minutes he was on the Wagon Rod trail following Jean Pardmore, who was a mile or so ahead. If she would not accept his escort, he at least would keep her in view.

As he rode, the Texan speculated on the queer twist of fate that might defeat Bill Wilcox's plan to have his old ranger associate come in and investigate the situation from his enemy's camp. The girl did not slacken her pace, and Menlo remained at a respectable distance behind for the next half-hour. Then, when the mesa fell away into huge palisades and serrated hogbacks to the green grass of the valley, he stiffened his pace, to keep her in view as she wound in and out among the canonicitas, below ancient Indian cliff dwellings.

Menlo scanned the valley for possible evidences of a renewal of the range feud that might account for the non-arrival of the Wagon Rod riders. There were none.

In plain view, on the near floor of the valley, lay two adobe houses, roofless, with broken walls. These were undoubtedly the 'Dobe Ruins that Sands had mentioned. To the right clustered a group of ranch buildings—the Wagon Rod seven miles from Chavez. In the far distance lay another ranch headquarters, immense in size—the Bar W. A little farther on was a more extensive group of buildings, unquestionably the town of Ranger.

Jean Pardmore had momentarily dropped from sight among the great gashes of the descent from the mesa. Menlo urged his bronco down-

ward. He turned a brown earth wall in the canonicita and abruptly came upon the girl. She had drawn up, waited for him.

As he neared she faced him. "You're a stranger on this range. What is your name?" she inquired shortly.

"Menlo Dory, ma'am—at your service."

"You're silly, coming here. You'll likely be shot."

"Thanks for the information." The Texan smiled. "Who'll do the shooting?"

"Anybody, depending upon what outfit you join. There's a feud on, and no man can remain neutral."

"That why you halted—to tell me that?"

"No!" She raised a hand. "That outfit straight ahead is the Wagon Rod. On the other side of the valley is the Bar W. Are you *sure* you know where you are going?"

"To the Wagon Rod. Might we ride together?"

"No, I'll ride alone. Either go ahead, or trail me."

"I'll let you lead."

She veered off to the southwest, along a well beaten trail, in which wagon wheels and hoofs had stamped the bunch grass and sage. Menlo loitered, giving her a good lead. He wondered why she declined to ride with him. He believed now she had halted in the screen of the canonicita only because she did not want other eyes to see her talk to the stranger. But one thing stood out strongly: she would not have halted to speak to him in that isolated gulch if she did not trust him.

He had gone but a short distance, riding on the floor of the valley now, when he noted that the trail the girl was taking curved outward from the Wagon Rod, avoiding the two abandoned adobe shacks. Those shacks were in a straight line for the ranch.

What Sands had said about the ruins roused the Texan's curiosity; he decided to cut past them, keeping the girl in view on the curving trail, and rejoin her farther on. He had gone but a few hundred yards toward the adobes when Jean Pardmore broke into a gallop toward him.

"You'd better follow the trail I am taking," she said sharply.

"Thought I'd cut off some, straight for the ranch."

She studied him for a long moment. "You're new to the Hidden Valley ranch, that's certain!" she exclaimed vehemently. "See those 'dobs in that draw ahead?"

"Figured I'd go by them—"

"That's 'Dobe Tombs. They call them that now. The draw is disputed ground. Bar W and our trails go around it. Several men have been shot from those adobes. I'd advise you not to take that course."

The Van Horn man smiled. I'm much obliged for the information. I see you don't want my riding company. Your men friends aren't in sight, so I'll still keep you under my eye, even when I take the draw."

He veered down toward the saucer-like depression and fell into a distance-consuming lope.

The space between girl and man widened, though they were traveling for the same group of buildings, southwestward. The adobes were in Menlo's direct path, and he made sure that Jean Pardmore was in view the full distance.

From the outside the ruins seemed to be of two rooms each, the corner of one fallen in, a side wall of another, and both were roofless. Later cattlemen might have used them for line camps. A trickle of water where the grass was greenest partly explained their location. The adobes were a hundred feet apart.

The rider made hasty note of the entire valley. It seemed flat from the high mesa; but once in it, low lomas were evident, rising gently from the slopes. Hidden Valley was more properly a series of little valleys between two high ranges—the Broken Bow and the Santa Isabel, with the high mesa on the north.

Depressions marked it here and there, of which the draw sheltering the adobes was deepest. The draw was without high growth, grass and clay-covered, with low clumps of junco thorn, too small to shield the figure of a man. The spring rains of that country had greened the grass of the draw and the entire valley. Surface lakes—waterholes—shone beyond.

As the Texan rode up to the first of the abandoned dwellings he observed that the heavy, hewn-timber door had fallen down, a ruin within the threshold. Swinging from the saddle, he took a step forward, then halted abruptly.

His eyes chilled as they rested on a figure in leather chaps sprawled within the room, motionless, back to the earthen floor, arms outstretched.

"Killed," he murmured, and looked hastily about him, behind to the open slope of the draw, to the left at the second house, to the rise ahead where Jean Pardmore was riding. He took a step toward the ruined doorway. The sharp, angry snarl of a rifle smote his ears and a knife-blade sensation slashed his side under the arm.

El Montero, the Hunter, bounded through the doorway of the room where the dead range rider lay.

3

MENLO DORY had not had time to determine from what direction the shot had come; he knew it was a rifle report he had heard, and that the distance was a little long for him to be on an even footing with his forty-five Colt gun. Of one thing he was certain: the would-be assassin had not fired from the adobe where the slain cowpuncher lay. Yet he

knew when he sprang forward there was a chance of confederates of the assassin being in the shack. He went in with gun raised, and saw at a glance that the interior was empty save for the dead man; the one-time partition between the rooms had fallen in complete ruin across the rear floor.

Without examining the body—no novel sight for the ex-ranger and peace officer—he turned swiftly at the doorless entrance, eyes and face at the dry-rotted wood jamb. No one was in sight without. Not even the horse of the slain rider was in evidence, and Menlo had not noticed it when he rode into the draw. His own mount stood where the Texan had slipped the reins over his head. Running his hand up through the flannel shirt to the spot where the bullet had grazed him, he felt the jagged surface of the flesh, and his fingers came out red; but he knew the wound was nothing—merely a skin crease.

Whoever this rifleman in ambush was, he had evidently slain the man on the floor. From the position of the body, Menlo concluded that the victim of the assassin had been dragged into the adobe after the shooting.

That the killer was in the upper adobe or behind it was the conclusion of the Texan. To go into the open now, without knowing the position of the hidden foe, armed with a longer-range weapon than his own, would be taking grave chances. Yet Menlo Dory had no intention of remaining under cover, a prisoner; the old hatred of the killer breed was hot within him, in the presence of a desperado who shot from behind. He bent hastily to the still figure on the floor, saw that the slain man was a youth of perhaps twenty, a rider, as indicated by spurs and chaps. A hole in the neck told how he had died. The Texan rose quickly, and with gun in hand approached the door again. He determined he must make a cautious advance on the adjoining house, trusting his own keen eyes and alert finger muscles to meet any foe who would stir in the windowless shack or behind it.

Stepping into the sun-glare, he advanced with light, swaying motion forward, eyes flitting from the door of the upper adobe to the two sides, and back and forth, ready for the telltale glint of steel. Two-thirds of the way he had gone, when into the outer focus of his vision came moving objects on the skyline in the near distance, behind the shack a matter of miles. But he did not allow his gaze to be diverted an instant, knowing that a lapse of vigilance for the fraction of a second might prove fatal. He moved more quickly, reached the opening of the adobe, paused an instant, then swung in swiftly, gun weaving.

The room was empty. He made sure no man was lurking behind the half fallen partition that had once divided the two rooms.

He glided out again, hugging the west wall, knowing that riders were approaching, but paying scant attention to them in the tense business of the moment. Quickly he swung about along the mud-brick wall,

turned the corner, went the round again, circling the house. He made sure no marauder might have evaded him and gained admittance to the shack; then started on a brisk run for the first house. He looked within, circled the adobe two times, and gave it up.

"That's a puzzler!" he murmured, his eyes searching the slopes of the draw. In that open country no man could hide. Yet neither shack held the attacker. "That hombre couldn't have left this draw, on foot or horse, without me seeing him. And he's not in either of these two adobes. No wonder they call 'em 'Dobe Tombs! I know well enough someone fired on me less than five minutes ago." He felt the smart of the skin wound in his side.

To southward he saw the curving cavalcade entering the draw from the rolling loma that rose before the Pardmore home base. Holstering his gun, he strode to the crumbling door of the first house and waited.

The riders advanced. In the brief period of their approach within recognizable distance, Menlo observed their faces, for future reference. None of them he had ever seen before. Leading the bunch was a smart, swart individual on a miniature buckskin cow horse. Almost at his side, a little behind, rode an erect, powerfully built cowman in a new undented gray Stetson of huge proportions; he seemed to be coaching the little man. On the other side of the leader was another giant, almost a counterpart of the first, save for a streaming mustache. The two in the rear the Texan did not have time to mark before the cavalcade suddenly broke formation.

Each of the big men galloped rapidly apart, away from the little rider in the center and lead. Immediately the two behind spread the wings of the crescent that was forming. Menlo Dory knew instantly that they were scattering to surround him, driving in on the adobe before which he was standing. The center figure engaged his immediate attention.

As the little rider neared, the Texan scrutinized a strikingly ugly face, flattened nose, angular jaws, a cruel mouth; the deep-set eyes were repellent, piercing, even at that distance. He wore a chin-strap and a pair of guns, which bobbed slightly in their holsters as he loped steadily forward. Abruptly he drew into a walk, as the other riders continued on to complete their maneuver. In a moment more the two big men and those on their flanks reined up short, and waited.

A saturnine smile broke on the bronzed face of the Texan; these men had mistaken him for an enemy—possibly the one who had slain the cowboy in the adobe. This fact interested him less than the plain stratagem that, to his experienced eyes, was being consummated. Flanked on left and right, the little man of the swarthy, savage features was obviously taking it upon himself to fight the battle for the bunch—the prize gunman of the outfit. Menlo Dory did not have time to speculate on their identity, for the rider of the twin guns suddenly

cleared the stirrups and was on the ground, advancing on foot. Then on the little buckskin's shoulder Menlo caught the little circle brand with the long rod extending outward—the Wagon Rod.

The ex-ranger was facing the gunman, giving little heed to the riders who remained in the saddle watching. Menlo's lone holster slanted at his right hip, gun butt protruding. That fact, he reflected, explained why the little man of the squashed nose continued to advance without making a pass for his guns. The time was not yet. Real six-shooters drew at close range.

They were now thirty feet apart, the Texan standing in easy attitude before the open door behind which the slain cowboy lay; the slowly advancing stranger moving forward with an even tread that held a menace and a challenge. Still he came on, without speaking, and Menlo Dory gave him credit for knowing how to meet an enemy with guns. His shoulders rode almost without rise or fall; his hands moved scarcely at all from their position near the thonged-down holsters.

It was on the lips of Menlo to announce that the strangers were making a mistake, to prevent bloodshed; but he check himself. It was up to them to explain. If the gunman reached for his weapons—

Out of the direct gaze of his intent eyes, the Texan saw indistinctly that the flanker riders were tensed, leaning forward; they would be ready to take up the battle if their leader should lose. But the fact that they held their saddles told Menlo they had supreme confidence in the ability of the flat-nosed little fighter to act for the party. Twenty-five feet, and then twenty, and the man of the two guns halted, head slightly outthrust from a remarkably thick neck for one so small. He spoke, in grating, acrimonious tones, cracked lips scarcely moving.

"Wagon Rod has come to tally the count, hombre, what with Bar W chalkin' up with Flem Jones, layin' dead behind yuh where yuh dragged him! I'm askin' yuh to draw, before I kill yuh!"

"Thanks." Menlo made a wry face. "You're dealin' from a stacked deck, stranger," he added evenly. "Not wanting trouble with Wagon Rod, I'll state I'm new here. Happened on this range not two hours ago, and never saw the waddy till I found him dead."

The little gunman's lip curled in a sneer. His shoulders sank in a slight crouch. "Tell it to the buzzards," he snapped, his sinister, deep-set eyes gleaming with the man-lust. "Draw!"

He reached for his guns, with both hands.

4

SOMETHING indefinable about the diminutive gunman had warned the former police officer that he had encountered this personage before; he recalled vividly the reference in Bill Wilcox's letter to Skag Garone.

Skag, too, had been small of stature and slim, like this one; but there were other little men, and in the darkness of the El Paso street Menlo had not seen the face of Garone. It would not do to assume his identity with no proof, as the Texan's experience as a lawman had taught him more than once. Yet in the brief instant before the gun gesture, Menlo had perceived clearly that the man facing him was of the type to whom to kill was the paramount passion; he read it in the animal eyes. To argue would be futile, even to advance the fullest proof of the Texan's new arrival. The gunman's blood was up; the shooting of the cowboy was not the compelling motive with him; it was the excuse he sought to use his itching gun-hands. At least, so Menlo read it.

Thus, when the lone duelist uttered the word "Draw!" and swept his hands holsterward, Menlo Dory's narrowed blue eyes perceived the motion almost before begun, timed by the challenger's attitude rather than the visible act. The Wagon Rod gunman did not complete the movement. At the very edges of his leather pouches his fingers wavered in their reach, his two hands widened, jerked outward and upward. A look of amazed unbelief mingled with fear swept to the hard eyes.

The Texan's forty-five sat motionless at his hip, slightly tilted upward at the deep-set, repellent orbs; the neck muscles of Menlo Dory were drawn taut as catgut under the lean jaws, the strong, calm face transformed into vibrant ferocity that was not pleasant to look upon. El Montero of the border lived again, after seven years.

Menlo had made the draw for which he was noted, a single motion that for swift smoothness and near invisibility he knew his antagonist had never seen surpassed; one that even the ex-ranger did not know how he achieved, except that he had always been able to do it since one awakening practice day in his teens. More than once that gift had saved his life.

The swart, flat-nosed gunman was reaching high, and his deep-set eyes continued to stare as though fascinated in the near presence of death. The Texan was conscious of the tense, unmoving attitude of the riders to left and right of him. He knew their amazement would be only momentary, and tensed with the expectancy that their blazing guns would give answer. Only their leader was covered; with one of their own cowboys lying slain in the adobe, the victim of an assassin, they would not be expected to yield to a foe who had balked their chosen duellist, so long as their own guns were free. This was war; they would risk getting their man even at the expense of one or more of their number.

As for the diminutive chieftain of the party, he had no choice but to keep his hands above his head until the foe turned to defend himself from the others when they got into action. Menlo did not shift position to left or right; to put that circling band under his domination would,

he knew, spell needless bloodshed, if possible at all. He could but chance further negotiations that would shed a new light on the matter to *them*.

On the verge of uttering an explanation, he saw the hazy forms of the two outmost riders moving quickly backward, to get farther to his rear. He sensed suddenly that one of them had left the saddle and glided to the walls of the adobe. This one was working to get directly behind Menlo, and had virtually achieved his object.

There was the meaningful sound of the cocking of a gun from the adobe. The Texan's choice was a hard one; to turn toward the new menace would release the gun-hands of the little chieftain. Besides, while Menlo did not hesitate to defend himself from a killing-bent duelist who was blind to reason, he did not wish to slay men who had come merely to avenge a wrong. Nor would it be well to die, mistaken as the murderer of the boy Flem Jones.

Yet the aroused bloodhound in Menlo Dory would not permit him to plead or beg. The seconds dragged, and still there was no gun-shot. The unbroken silence continued, and then it was plain why the riders had not taken up the battle of their worsted chief.

A rider curved around the upper house. Without removing his gaze from the flat-nosed gunfighter, Menlo caught the outlines of a girl figure; he knew she must be Jean Pardmore, drawn to the scene when she saw that her ranchmen had come upon him. She continued at a lope until she took her place beside the big cowman at the right.

She spoke words which the Texan could not make out. The giant of the undented gray Stetson moved his mount toward the stranger.

"Put up yore gun," he ordered, but there was a hesitant, neutral inflection in his tone.

"Draw your four hombres in front, and I'll be pleased to oblige," answered Menlo.

"Stranger," drawled the other apologetically, "I reckon it's our mistake, my daughter havin' vouched for you ridin' in with her on the Santa Fe." He removed his hat, wiped his perspiring forehead, ran his fingers through his great black mane, slightly graying at the sides. "What's yore business?"

The Texan had holstered his gun "Punching cows."

Lew Pardmore stepped his mount nearer, while his gunfighter lowered his hands, taking Menlo's action as a signal. The Texan did not object, though he watched the little man intently, even while the Wagon Rod owner spoke.

"Punching cows," repeated Pardmore slowly. "You sav'y how to handle a six-gun, stranger."

"Some."

"Some." The cattleman left the saddle, strode up and extended a hand. "I'm Lew Pardmore."

"My name's Menlo Dory."

"Dory. I ain't ever heard it. You ain't an Arizona man."

"Texas."

"Mister Dory, you'd be shot now, twice over, if it wasn't for my daughter arrivin'. Especially because you stole the drop from a man that's never been matched for guns in Arizona." He turned his immense head and nodded toward the puncher of the chin-strap and flat nose. "You opened our eyes, stranger, and I reckon you opened Tevizon's." He said the last with a chuckle. The little man's ugly face distorted into a scowl. "How'd you like to hire out to the Wagon Rod?" Pardmore added.

"What job?"

"Punchin' cows."

"How much?" Menlo Dory was inwardly gratified at the turn in events that would place him with the Wagon Rod without the persuasive arguments that he feared would be necessary. But he did not show it.

"Sixty and found."

That was above average wages, the Texan knew. "Reckon I might ride for you."

"Mister York will take care of you. This is Mister York," gesturing to the other powerfully built man, still sitting his horse.

York, tugging at his long, yellowish mustache, nodded genially.

Pardmore singled out the others, a red-cheeked youth owning the savage name of "Panther" Treek, and a wrinkled, long-necked veteran called Jim Ash. "And this," added the Wagon Rod owner, "is Tevizon." He paused a moment, then:

"I give yuh credit, Mister Dory, for toppin' him in that draw. Only way I can account for it—not wishin' to detract from yore own speed with your Colt—is that Tev was taken plumb off guard, not expectin' to run into one that could anyways give him a contest. There ain't ever been a man in Hidden Valley, Mister Dory—and they's some good ones here—that come near meetin' him till you done the trick today!"

Tevizon's face clouded at the obvious effort of his boss to ease his wounded pride. "I wasn't lookin' for any fancy stuff," he mumbled. "Countin' you was on'y one of Bill Wilcox's co-called pistol-fighters. If I'd knowed I was havin' the honor of meetin' the world's champeen draw artist, I might have showed my style." His split lip curved down in a sneer as he turned away.

DORY turned toward Lew Pardmore, who had left his companions to secure the body of the cowboy. "There was shooting here just before you arrived—rifle," he said to Pardmore. "I haven't figured it yet, unless the earth swallowed that assassin up."

The cattleman shook his big head. "Same old story. We heard that shot, thought it was you. I ain't got time to start at the beginnin', but Bill Wilcox's murderin' snakes has been wagin' war on the Wagon Rod, drivin' off our stock, shootin' some, and, to top it off, killin' our men. Pore Flem Jones!" He swallowed and his throat muscles contracted. "Makes the third." He motioned to the Texan. "Let's you and me go through these 'dobs again. You take that 'un; me the other."

They separated, Menlo going to the lower shack, examining the interior carefully, making sure there was no tunnel or underground passageway through which a man might escape. Then they advanced, Menlo taking the second house, giving it a like examination.

Pardmore rejoined him. "There was nobody rode out this draw since that shot. We'd been watchin' you skulkin' around the 'dobs after him, but thought you was sure him."

He smiled in puzzlement; then his brown eyes hardened into agates. "Been pottin' 'em every time a Wagon Rod rider come by. A week ago Abe Abronson was killed the same way, and his body dragged into that same shack. When we got our men and come down here, the Bar W snakes was gone. They never yet took a shot when there was a bunch—always when they caught a rider alone."

He frowned at the memory of it. "We hunted this place high and low and kept a watch for three days, but got no trace of how they killed Abe. Them skunks never showed up as long as there was two-three of us.

"This mornin' when we was ridin' to Chavez to meet Jean at the train—there bein' six of us then—we cut straight through by these 'Dobe Tombs, thinkin' to look around for any new clues—this draw bein' disputed ground and us makin' concessions not to trespass unduly till the courts decides. Well, the 'dobs was still as a sidewinder, and we rode on ahead. But Flem, our kid rider, says he'd wager if he stayed here alone he'd draw fire, even if nobody was here. We tried to argy him out of it, but let him stay, thinkin' he'd be safe anyway till we met the train and come ridin' back this way. Pore Flem!"

The cowman's eyes went to the doorway, where the Wagon Rod men were carrying Flem Jones out and laying him across the saddle of Panther Treek's horse. "We cut back out of the draw to take the easy Wagon Rod trail to the railroad. We no more'n got back of the rise till we heard a shot. We turned back pronto, and seen Flem's hoss travelin'

riderless out of the draw. Before we got fair started toward the 'dobs we seen a big bunch of Bar W snakes ridin' hell-for-leather up that deep arroyo that cuts into the mesa—" gesturing northward.

Menlo Dory's brows contracted. He had not been aware of the presence of other riders, probably because they were masked in the arroyo. Could they have had a hand in it, after all? But even so, the Texan was certain the rifleman who shot at him could not have rejoined them.

"They was double our number," went on Pardmore, "and we drawed back a little spell. Musta been five minutes we waited. We seen Jean ridin' from Chavez way on the Wagon Rod trail, and knowed she'd got through safe. When we started down to the 'dobs, the Bar W bunch was out of sight. We knowed exactly where the kid was—dead in that shack like Abe Abronson. Then's when we run into you, and you kin see how near we come to makin' you pay for that pore boy's murder."

Menlo Dory nodded grimly. "Mister Pardmore, I've taken that job you offered, but I forgot to mention there's a string tied to it."

"Yeah?" Quick suspicion was in the cowman's look.

"Before I go to work, I aim to stick around these so-called 'Dobe Tombs a spell—rest of the afternoon maybe. When I got here, that hombre took a shot at me." He lifted his arm, revealing where the bullet scratch had left a dark stain on his gray flannel shirt. "Pricked me here—a danged good shot, except for my hog luck. I know that dry-gulcher didn't ride out of this draw. I aim to see where he's at."

Lew Pardmore's jaw fell. "I'd advise yuh not. Sounds foolish, and it stands to reason that killer got away, even if he didn't show hisself goin'. But from what I've seen you'll likely be shot, if yuh stick here alone. There's more'n one of 'em, and Bill Wilcox has imported a bunch of new killers."

"I'll stay. Are there any holes around here, caves or old shafts that a man could hide in, Mr. Pardmore?"

"Nary a one—not within a mile of these houses. I reckon yore mind's made up, Mister Dory, and yore face looks like you can't be argied out of it. But I'm warnin' yuh there ain't been a time in weeks when a Wagon Rod man visited these 'Dobe Tombs that he wasn't shot at, and mostly killed."

Menlo showed even white teeth. "I'll let 'em try again."

Menlo watched them to the top of the first rise out of the draw. If what Pardmore had said was true, the hidden rifleman at the adobes would not get into action while the bunch were in sight.

In the bright sunlight of midday it all seemed unreal, ridiculous, that danger should still lurk in the two old ruins of shacks called 'Dobe Tombs. In spite of Pardmore's profession of fear, Menlo felt that the cowman believed the Bar W gunmen had done the shooting, then retreated under screen of one of the buildings.

But the Texan knew otherwise, from his own experience. Since there

were no holes about, and the draw was smooth and unbroken, without so much as a sizeable clump of mesquite behind which to hide, the rifleman must still be about the adobes. Menlo gave the houses another going-over.

He emerged no wiser, sat in the doorway of the lower shack and rolled a cigarette. His horse cropped the scattered bunch grass fifty feet away. No cattle grazed in the draw, and Menlo assumed they were line-ridden to keep them off the disputed ground. All was peaceful, silent, save for the scrapings of a wood-rat whose nest of sticks the Texan had noted in a corner of the abandoned adobe.

The Wagon Rod riders had been out of sight for some minutes. Soon they would be beyond earshot of a gun report.

"Reckon I mightn't be in proper range if I stick here in this doorway," drawled the ex-ranger to himself. "I'll give him a come-on chance!"

Feeling somewhat foolish to engage in a battle of wits against a daylight phantom, Menlo strode out into the open, continued until about thirty paces from the houses, at equal distance to the two. He did not relax vigilance, nonsensical as the situation appeared. His experience as a lawman had taught him never to take a chance needlessly. His companions would now be out of gun-report distance. His eyes searched the adobes.

Suddenly his neck muscles jumped; his hand flashed and gun leaped. He did not fire, for the pair of eyes at the edge of the ruined doorway had as suddenly vanished, and no gun was in evidence. To take the culprit alive would be better, so long as he did not attempt battle.

The Texan sprinted forward, bent on entering the room with the assassin, fearing a contest of guns with no man. Halfway, and a revolver barrel moved at the edge of the opening.

El Montero's gun blazed, and he saw the pistol hurtle back into the room. With the zest of the old man-hunt racing in his veins, he quickened his pace.

Three steps, and the Texan's ears smote with a rifle report from another direction. His head seemed to burst, and all was blackness.

6

WHEN Menlo Dory regained consciousness, there lingered with him the picture, very definite in its outlines, of a man's face, beetle-browed, hairy, blossom-nosed, in which gleamed close-set lynx eyes. How this individual had figured in events after the bullet laid him low he did not know. Just at the moment he was more concerned about the fact that he was weak and wounded, that he was lying on a clean bed in a

clean room, alone. His head throbbed with dull pain, and he felt the heavy bandages that swathed his forehead and scalp.

He was in a neat, plastered and papered room, on whose walls hung a pair of old-fashioned steel engravings of battle scenes, and one of the likeness of Robert E. Lee. A high walnut bureau, three chairs and a table containing a water pitcher and glasses with spoons on them—medicine—made up the visible furnishings.

He tried to raise his head, but found he could not; he was glad to lie back quiet for a time. A figure moved in the hallway. Menlo's eyeballs hurt as he rolled them sidewise to see Jean Pardmore enter. She came to the bed, looked down at his opened eyes, and smiled a very pretty smile.

"Pret' near finished me—" he began, returning her smile, surprised at how weak his voice sounded. "How did you find me?"

"Please don't talk," she said gently. "Doctor's orders, for a little while. Just lie quiet and all will come out right." She conveyed a spoonful of liquid from one of the glasses, raising his head slightly. Then she gave him water, whose cool sweetness seemed the most delicious thing that he had ever tasted.

Soon she left him. Once Lew Pardmore came to the door, looked in and grinned amiably. Menlo knew he was at the Wagon Rod ranch house. He fell asleep, and when he awoke the sun was streaming through the eastern window. Pardmore tiptoed in at that early hour.

"How you feelin', Mister Dory?"

"Good!" Menlo's head was clear, the pain less, and he felt stronger. He started to sit up. Pardmore waved him back.

"Take it easy. Be all right in a couple of weeks. Bar W' got yuh plumb along the cranium, narrerest squeak yuh ever had, I reckon."

"Yeah. How'd you happen along, to find me?"

"We done got uneasy, the more we rode, thinkin' of that pore kid we was totin' in dead. Jean, bein' a woman, with her sixth sense, or intuition, or whatever it was, says we'd better go back and see if there was any trouble. Panther and Jim rode ahead with the body, and me and York and Tevizon turned back, with Jean. 'Bout five minutes, and we heard a shot, plain—wouldn't even heard it if we hadn't turned back. When we got to the rim of the draw you wasn't in sight."

"Where'd you find me?"

"In the lower 'dobe."

The Texan's eyes widened; he had remembered distinctly being away from the houses when the bullet struck him.

"Then skunks thought you was shore killed when they dragged yuh in," added the cowman, "and didn't have time to find out different owin' to our arrivin'. Doc don't want you to talk none about it, yet awhile." He went out.

The patient rested, but his brain was active. One thing seemed plain.

Tevizon might be a killer, as Menlo was satisfied he was, but he could not have done the shooting at the adobes.

An hour later Dr. Woods arrived from Ranger, redressed the wounds in the patient's skull. "You're coming along fine," he said. "Got to keep quiet, and you'll be around in a week or two."

Jean brought fresh glasses and the doctor left new medicine and departed. Menlo heard him tell Pardmore in the hallway: "Better not excite him."

During the morning he slept again. When he awoke he was ravenously hungry. He raised himself on an elbow, testing his strength. He felt able to sit up, and was adjusting the pillows when Jean entered.

"You'd better not sit up," she said dubiously. "After a while you can try, and then you can eat something."

"Thanks," said Menlo, as the girl eased him back. "Reckon I'll have to behave, with so many folks watching me." He dozed again, and when he opened his eyes Jean was sitting beside him, reading.

"I feel like getting up." He swung around, to place his feet on the floor, but a wave of weakness swept over him and he went back limp.

Jean fixed the pillows so he could sit, and hurried out. Presently she returned with a tray of toast and milk. He devoured all of it.

"First I've eaten since yesterday morning. Did your men search those 'Dobe Tombs after they found me, Miss Jean?"

"Yes. We hunted all around, brought you to the house, and the men went back, with a half-dozen more, and searched until late at night, but didn't find him."

"There were two," Menlo informed her grimly. "I saw one in that lower shack, and started for him, when the rifle cracked from the other house. There were two."

"All right; let's not speak of it now. We've talked enough."

"You folks are mighty kind—to a stranger."

"Not a stranger, but a Wagon Rod man," she said. "Let's not talk for a while."

"Doc thinks my head might be affected?" Menlo grinned.

"No, he doesn't," Jean said.

Three days passed, and the Texan sat up in bed for hours at a time. Jean and her father waited on the patient as though the ranch house were a hospital.

"Doggoned funny the way them Bar W coyotes got out'n the draw between the time we heard the shot and got there," Pardmore affirmed.

"They didn't leave—couldn't leave," he went on, shaking his great head. "But they wasn't there when we arrived; musta holed up somewhere. Bar W shoots only if there's one man to kill—never tackles a bunch."

"You plumb sure it's Bar W?" queried Menlo casually.

"Are we shore it's—?" Pardmore stared at him. "Knowin' the rec-

ord they got for killin', and the history of this war and thievery, there ain't any doubt, Mister Dory."

"I was just asking. Some of Wilcox's men were killed, too, weren't they?"

"Uh huh! Two. Dang their hides! Deserved what they got, too, because they was shot by their own men, by mistake, while they was layin' to shoot some of us, at the Tombs!"

"When was that?"

"A month ago, right after Slim Weeks, our first man, was shot. We seen Full-House Cox, a Wilcox snake, around them 'dobes the day Slim was shot. We started after him, but he hid out and we searched the 'dobes. Comin' back, we seen Bar W riders goin' toward the Tombs. They was shootin', and then's when they killed two o' their men, both at once, that same afternoon!"

To urge on Pardmore the possibility that anyone but Wilcox was guilty of the 'Dobe Tombs slayings Menlo knew was out of the question. Yet the Texan was certain. Wilcox would not countenance crimes of this kind, even in retaliation.

Rising like the web of a dream came a picture of a hairy visage and close-set lynx eyes. Though the impression came somewhere near the shadowland of unconsciousness, Menlo did not doubt that the face had been near him—perhaps it was that man who had dragged him into the adobe for dead. He mentioned it to Pardmore.

"What did he look like?"

"Big face, red nose, hairy, overhanging brows. Can't exactly describe him; don't know if he's tall or short. But I reckon I'd know that face if I ever saw it again. I aim to look for that mug the minute I get out of here."

"I'll help yuh."

"How long's Tevizon been working for you, Mr. Pardmore?"

"He come right after Slim Weeks was killed. Happened along in Ranger, and had a run-in with Full-House Cox, and disarmed that gun-toter so slick it was unbelievable. Hearin' there was a war on, and hatin' Cox, he hired out his gun to us."

"You hired other men since?"

"Yeah, but not till Wilcox started importin' killers from up Utah way."

The Texan asked no further questions then, feared almost that he had asked too much about Pardmore's personal affairs. But he did a lot of thinking. In spite of all the circumstances—the alibi of Tevizon in the actual shooting, the fight staged between Tevizon and Full-House Cox, the Texan's man-hunter sense told him that Tevizon held the key to the murders; told him also that the little gunman was the Skag Garone whom he had come to deliver to the authorities as the escaped border outlaw and killer.

The man of the hairy face, he felt, was an accomplice, and there were probably more of them mixed up in the murders for some unsolved purpose.

Jean Pardmore continued to act as nurse, and Menlo felt himself drawn to her. That she might consider him merely as a valuable hired gunman—one whom the Wagon Rod had practically stolen from Bar W—troubled him. He began to loathe the role of spy—detective work it was, but the ugly name always intruded. He dreaded that she should ever know how he had come to the Wagon Rod.

7

WHEN the last Sunday in June arrived, the end of the second week. Menlo was looking forward to the morrow, when he would join the Wagon Rod working hands, for he had tested the saddle and found himself fit. The evening before the big day arrived, he and Jean sat together on the veranda of the old ranch house. It was a delightful evening, mild and rose-scented from Jean's garden. Menlo Dory realized he had come to love the Wagon Rod girl, yet he hesitated to tell her so.

He rose, fearing he might say more than he intended at this stage.

"Don't go—yet," she insisted. "I haven't told you all. You said you owed me a debt. You really don't, but if you want to help me—" She hesitated.

"Certainly," he said quickly.

"If you could learn who are the real killers at 'Dobe Tombs, and prove to Dad and the Wilcoxes that neither side has been guilty, you would do me the greatest favor possible. Bob Wilcox and I were to have been married, when this trouble came up," she added quietly. "No doubt you know he is the son of the Bar W owner. You—understand?"

Menlo Dory smiled, betraying none of the shock that wrenched him.

"I am of the same opinion as you, Miss Pardmore, about the killings, and I'll do all a human can do to prove it—so you and your young man won't be divided by a long-drawn-out feud." He moved a step back. "I suspect your dad hired me chiefly on account of my gun, and I'm going to ask him to let me put in a day, or a week, or a month, around 'Dobe Tombs, until I run down the bunch that drew blood on me twice. It's got to be a personal matter with me, I guess, besides my being anxious to clear up things, for your sake and Bob's."

He turned away, to hide the swift pain. Then his face became masked, immobile. He strolled out into the ranch yard and away from the lighted bunkhouse.

In the morning, when the Texan appeared at the horse corral at daylight, Lew Pardmore and York were already saddled up. "Sho'! Didn't expect yuh this early," grinned the boss. "Cows is all pastured and

won't ship till tomorrow morning. Boys will move 'em to the pens at Chavez this evenin'."

"Noticed that bunch there saddling up—" Menlo gestured to three surly-looking punchers, heavy-eyed, who looked as though they had lost sleep the night before.

"Them's Monk Baizee, Tomlinson and Powder LaMotte. New men I brung in couple weeks ago—might need 'em, and they're handy with sixes. Think they got to git up early to earn their wages, there bein' nothin' for them to do." The cowman chuckled.

Menlo observed the three with interest. He had seen two of them casually, during the days he was able to stroll about on the veranda. One, who resembled a Chinese, with mere slits of slanting eyes, Menlo learned afterward was Monk Baizee. Tomlinson was a hard-bitten, bow-legged, wrinkled puncher whose glance was shifty, ever roving. Powder LaMotte was clean-shaven, double-chinned, resembling a banker but for his rider garb. "A mean bunch to tie to," reflected Menlo.

"How'd you come to get 'em?" he asked aloud.

"Tevizon gave me their address, and we sent a night letter."

This bit of information was what Menlo sought; it was important, in line with his theory.

"No sign of any stock being missed lately?" queried the Texan, a moment later.

"Nix. We'd have heard. Got men on watch, near the Tombs, and Panther and Jim Ash will guard the stock at the pens tonight at the railroad. Why?"

"Just was wondering." Menlo changed the subject. "You hired those three for their guns, mostly?"

"Likely I did."

"Mr. Pardmore, you employed me to ride herd, but I reckon it's no secret you're hiring me for my gun too?"

The cowman coughed, rubbed his square, bronzed chin, then grinned. "Mayhap, partly," he admitted, fidgeting.

"If that's the case, there's one thing I'd like to ask. Turn me loose a coupla weeks, to go it alone. I have a personal grudge against the party that fired that last shot, especially. I aim to get get him—and maybe turn up something that'll save the Wagon Rod a lot of grief."

"Shore—go to it, Menlo. What way you ridin' now?"

"'Dobe Tombs."

"Better not. We was goin' to town, but we'll go with you to 'Dobe Draw if yo're determined. Hello, what's *he* want!"

A bearded man in white shirt, black trousers and shining boots was riding toward them, around the bunkhouse. As he drew up Menlo recognized Carl Sands, Chavez trader.

"Why you all dolled up, Carl?" grinned Pardmore.

Sands dismounted, face grave. "Tended a dance last night, clean

over to Mayville. Come through Ranger, late, and Hatch Lambert fixed me up a blanket at the Jinglebob Saloon. Heard somethin' there." He made a face, spat suddenly.

"I'm neutral, as you gents kin vouch. I'm a friend of yours, and Bill Wilcox, too. But if it come to a showdown, I'd be with Lew Pardmore. That's me. I don't say much—ain't much for small talk—close-mouthed, if I do say it myself."

"Go on," grunted Pardmore.

"I heard somethin'. You folks understand, now—don't let this go no further. Act upon it, of course—if yuh have a mind to. But keep me out of it—I'm neutral." He gnawed off a fresh chew.

Pardmore mounted, gesturing impatiently.

Carl Sands made a sour face. "Of course, if yuh don't want to hear about one of yore men bein' laid for—"

"Go on—"

"Never mind. Ride along. I figured anyway Mister Dory would like to know, bein' it's him that's to be potted the minute he shows hisself in Ranger this mornin'!" He rolled his eyes, then turned to the saddle.

"Who's goin' to do said shootin'?" demanded Pardmore. "Mister Dory ain't even goin' to Ranger."

"I aint talkin'. I don't want any tales told about what Carl Sands was reckoned to have said. Folks knows me too well for that. It was in the Jinglebob. I heard Full-House Cox tell some hombre. I don't know his voice—must be one of them new men on this range—Bar W man from Utah way, likely. Full-House was sayin' how he'd git this new shootin' son from Texas, as he called Mister Dory, when he come to town this mornin'. Figured to get him into the Jinglebob and try his gun-hand on him. More'n that I ain't sayin'."

Close-mouthed Carl departed with voluble exclamations about being late getting home, having accommodations for the boys bringing the herd to the shipping pens that night, etc. Menlo turned to Lew Pardmore.

"Doubt if I ought to go to the Tombs this mornin'. Think I'll trail to Ranger—might see that hairy face I've been looking for."

"We're ridin' that way, too."

"I'd rather you'd not."

"Yeah, we'll go, like we planned in the first place. I was aimin' to see the sheriff, and demand the arrest of Bill Wilcox. This makes me sot on it. Hell will pop when I do, but there ain't no other way out."

They swung their mounts southward.

THEY had not gone beyond the pebble buttes on the way to town when Menlo saw a rider pursuing, in light blue blouse and brown skirt. He recognized Jean. They halted, and Pardmore frowned.

"You didn't wait for me, Daddy!" called the girl reprovingly, as she joined them.

"Sho', I plumb forgot," grumbled the cowman. "But you better pick some other day to do yore shoppin'."

She pleaded, and Pardmore yielded, exchanging a glance with Menlo, saying they would have to separate in town.

"Of course, I don't want you along," she laughed.

Menlo was aware Pardmore had not forgotten to wait for Jean, but had hoped she would oversleep. From what she had said the evening before, the Texan thought that Pardmore was keeping his daughter away from Ranger as much as possible—Bob Wilcox might spend much of his time there. Then there was the matter of the threat of Full-House to shoot the new puncher from Texas.

Jean, light-hearted, flashing pearly teeth, fell in beside Menlo. "When I am through, if Dad forgets to wait for me going home, I'll count on you, Mr. Dory."

Menlo nodded. "It'll be my pleasure, miss."

Her father, riding on the other side, lost his frown. "Menlo'll likely be too busy to be botherin' escortin' girls," he said seriously, but a slight grin broke on his features.

The Texan felt that Lew Pardmore was pleased that his daughter had picked Menlo as riding companion. Possibly he hoped she might forget Bob Wilcox in the presence of this new man on the range.

A horse in the distance, approaching from Ranger, attracted their attention.

"Panther Treek," grunted Pardmore. "He went over to that dance at Mayville, too."

When the red-cheeked puncher drew up his eyes were wide with news.

"Heard the latest?"

"What's now?" demanded his boss.

"Raid on the Bar W! We're gettin' hell—bein' blamed. They cut into Wilcox's bunch for a hundred head. Woulda got five hundred if they wasn't scared off. They shot Boxer Wilds in the laig. Wilcox men give pursuit, and corraled the stolen bunch just across the Santa Fe tracks—but the raiders got away, clean. It was eleven o'clock last night."

"Got all their cows back?" demanded Pardmore.

"Every head, but they're threatenin' murder. You'll hear all about it in town."

Pardmore gestured impatiently, dismissing Treek, turning to Menlo. "Course them skunks will lay it onto Wagon Rod, like they done these killin's of their men!"

"You reckon their own imported gunmen might be stealing their cattle?" queried Menlo with a grin.

"Shore! Wilcox has got a bunch of renegades workin' for him. What more kin he expect?"

Menlo reflected quickly that Full-House Cox could hardly have been with the cattle thieves, since Carl Sands had heard him make threats in the Jinglebob the night before, very late, after the dance. He recalled the unkempt, bleary-eyed appearance of Monk Baizec, Tomlinson and Powder LaMotte, back at the Pardmore corrals.

"How'd this trouble start?" queried Menlo. "Over the boundary dispute?"

"Ye-es." Pardmore seemed to be holding something back. "But there was no excuse. The draw where them 'dobes rests was disputed ground for two years, in the courts yet. We patched it up, and while we both claimed it, we all stayed off, havin' plenty good grass from the rains. Then when our first man was shot—Slim Weeks—we chased Bar W hands from them 'Dobe Tombs. Then's when the war started, and that same night we lost a couple dozen steers. Our men seen them bein' drove north; we give pursuit, but lost 'em in the Santa Isabel, and ain't found trace of them and others that has gone since, and them devils only a week before you come shot four cows with calf, not even to get the calves—the snakes!" His big brown eyes narrowed.

"Bar W coyotes will be watchin' our every move in Ranger. Expectin' us to even the score, since they killed pore Flem Jones and cut down on Mister Dory. There'll be oiled guns a-plenty in the Jinglebob. When they see Menlo here, there'll be talk! And when they hear about me demandin' Bill Wilcox's arrest—" His eyes rolled meaningly. He had cut off with a glance at Jean; had said too much in the presence of the girl.

Menlo did not want to alarm Jean further. Not desiring the arrest of Wilcox, he knew that such a move would not be favored by the girl either, bringing the whole range war to a crisis.

"Mayhap it'll be a bad time now to ask Wilcox's arrest—with that raid last night," ventured the Texan.

"No!" exploded the cowman. "We ain't guilty. Sheriff Langley has held off long enough, with that warrant sworn, carryin' water on both shoulders. He's got to act!"

Argument was futile, the Texan realized. Ranger lay ahead, near at hand, a sprawling cow town that, so far as Menlo could see, was like a score of others he had known in the West. A few scattered dwellings were discernible, with a wide street, on both sides of which were clustered false-fronted frame buildings, stores, an eating place or two,

saloons, dance halls, barber shop and the like. Lew Pardmore went ahead, at a jog trot, with York, leaving Menlo with Jean, perhaps intentionally.

"I didn't know about this trouble," she said gravely. "I hope you won't be a party to any—gunplay."

"Don't reckon there'll be any trouble, Miss Jean," he said lightly.

"You won't make any?"

"Not any."

Her large eyes were earnest. "Bar W is not behind this killing and rustling! But I cannot convince Dad of that." She drew her mount closer. "When Dad was telling how the trouble started, he left out something.

"I do not like to say it, but you should know. It was over me—and Bob."

Menlo's face muscles twitched slightly; he let her volunteer further information.

"Dad took a dislike to Bob Wilcox—would not give me any reason. He had words with Bob and told him never to talk to me again. He must have accused Bob of something—I don't know what—because his father took up the quarrel. From that time on the breach widened between the outfits, then the killing occurred and the cattle disappeared; it has been war ever since."

"You still know Bob Wilcox is—all right?" he asked her probingly.

"Yes. Father is a dear, but he has no right to interfere in such matters. Perhaps I am obstinate, but I am more determined on marrying Bob now than ever."

"I admire your spunk," said the Texan, more cheerfully than he felt.

They had reached the end of the long street of Ranger, where it melted into the open range. Lew Pardmore and York slowed, until the other two came up.

"Me and Pete will step in to see the sheriff. You join us there when you leave, Menlo. How long will it take for shoppin', Jean?"

"About an hour."

"We'll meet you at the store, about that time or a little later. You wait—unless Menlo comes for you first." He and York went ahead, down the street.

The Texan and the girl proceeded. Just at the entrance to the general merchandise establishment, a newly painted building housing supplies from horse feed to lingerie, Jean turned to Menlo.

"Don't look immediately, but the young man standing against the blue-front building is Bob Wilcox." She swung down lightly, and entered the store. There had been no exchanges between Jean and the youth; she was obedient to her parent in avoiding him.

Casually Menlo turned when opportunity offered and cast his eyes on the son of his old-time friend. Bob Wilcox was perhaps twenty-five,

blond, wore a gaudy purple silk shirt, had a pointed nose, and excessively thin, sharp lips. He seemed to Menlo to be unduly flushed, and then, suddenly, he walked a step or two and swayed. The Texan watched him, decided with surprise that the young man was under the influence of liquor. In a moment he staggered to the entrance of the Jinglebob Saloon and lurched through the swinging doors.

"I'm glad Miss Jean didn't notice it," mused Menlo. "A fool, disgracing himself that way, and him holding in his hand the heart of the finest girl in Arizona." His impulse was to follow Bob Wilcox and bring him to his senses. His eyes went again to the saloon bar, and at that moment he drew himself up with a jerk at sight of a face emerging from the Jinglebob. He did not notice the bulky frame, the garb, nor the gun that he wore—only the hairy countenance, the red nose, the close-set lynx eyes.

He recognized beyond mistake the face he had seen at 'Dobe Tombs just before he lost consciousness from the bullet wound. He knew now that he had not seen that face in a dream, but in reality.

The man had taken only a step or two, halted, stared toward the Texan, turned with a shrug and re-entered the Jinglebob. Menlo knotted his horse at the hitch-rack, turned and started across the street.

Part way over he caught sight of the waving arm of Lew Pardmore, who with York had dismounted before the rambling frame courthouse, at one end of which protruded the weatherbeaten sign, "Sheriff's Office." A slim cowpuncher was conversing with them.

The Texan paused, then sauntered up their way. When he joined them, Pardmore said, with suppressed excitement:

"I want you to hear this, Menlo. Say that again, will you, Red? This is Mister Dory, Mister Albers of Box Key, friend of Wagon Rod."

Red Albers surveyed the newcomer with more than passing interest. "I've heered about yuh, Mister Dory. So's a lot of them others," crooking his thumb toward the saloon. "There's a hombre in there name Full-House Cox—him that just stuck his head out the door—that's been makin' talk about cuttin' yuh down on sight. I reckon he just looked yuh over, and figured yuh might drift into the Jinglebob. He's been drinkin' some, and is a bad hombre, dangerous when he's lickered. Him and Bob Wilcox has been together all mornin'."

"You sure that was Full-House who came out there a minute ago, and went back in?"

"That was him. There's others in there, too, includin' his amigo, Baca, and Full-House says he wants to see yuh draw on him like you done on Tevizon."

The Texan moved away. "Where you goin'?" shot out Pardmore hastily.

"See you in a minute, after I interview Mister Full-House."

AS MENLO'S hand touched the swinging doors of the Jinglebob, a side glance told him Pardmore and York were moving. He hoped they were not coming to lend a hand. That would defeat his object. Menlo had not even told Pardmore that Full-House was the owner of the assassin face he had seen at 'Dobe Tombs; that would only have verified the cowman's claim that Bar W was doing the killing. The Texan shoved in the door, entered, at a seemingly careless stride.

His eyes did not go directly to Full-House Cox, though he had that individual in oblique range; he took note of the others, was ready for a "plant." The long barroom, cool in spite of the heat of the morning, harbored but five men apart from the bartender at that early hour—not so bad as Red Albers had indicated. Menlo learned later that five others, Bar W regular hands who had been up all night after the rustler raid, had quietly slipped through the back door of the Jinglebob two minutes after his presence had been noted in town.

Of the five now present, one was standing at the left wall corner against the dusty, fly-specked window; he had been looking out, watching Menlo. The Texan did not recognize him, though his olive skin indicated he might be Baca, of the common native and Mexican name.

Menlo's glance went to two men at a card table in the center of the room—cowboys in Stetsons, soft shirts and blue overalls, fixed to the California roll. These two also were strangers. Then, across from this pair, he saw a youthful figure set down a glass at the bar and wipe his lips.

Bob Wilcox wheeled around unsteadily and took a step forward belligerently. At that moment the other who had been at the bar drinking with young Wilcox cleared the brass rail, moving out slowly, a surly and crafty expression on the hairy face with the lynx eyes.

Menlo heard footsteps behind him, turned sideways to forestall a Bar W stroke from behind, and realized with chagrin that Pardmore and York had followed him in. He heard Pardmore's low tones at his ear:

"Hombre in the corner is the breed, Baca, Bar W; them other two is Wilcox riders, too. The kid is Wilcox's boy, and that fuzz face is Full-House Cox, Bar W killer. He's—"

"Go out!" urged Menlo earnestly. "I'll handle it alone!"

The cowman and his foreman made no move. Menlo acted promptly, striding backward, until he had reached the doors, pushed through them to the street. Pardmore and York followed quickly enough, now.

"Gosh, Menlo, that was a bad move. Full-House'll think—"

"Let 'em all think!" The Texan realized that his retreat would appear to the Jinglebob occupants as sign of a streak of yellow; he would

correct that impression promptly, but in the meantime he must get rid of his too willing aides.

"I'm going back in. Don't want you two along, or it'll look like Wagon Rod has come to start a ruckus. I'd advise you not to demand Wilcox's arrest at this stage, but if you're set on it, the quicker you get it over the better, while I interview that gent with the whiskers—"

"Full-House?" shot out Pardmore quickly. "He ain't the one with the face you're lookin' for?"

"Can't say," evaded Menlo. "If you can trust me to go after the 'Dobe Tombs killers, you let me run this. That too much to ask?"

"No-o." The Wagon Rod boss seemed doubtful, but his faith in the Texan was shown by his reluctant assent. "Me and Pete will go on to the sheriff's office, if you don't want us in there—"

"I don't." Menlo's tone was insistent; he was giving orders to his employer instead of taking them. Nonetheless, the Wagon Rod men, looking puzzled, started back up the street.

The Texan turned and entered the Jinglebob a second time. As he stepped through the doors he saw the half-breed Baca at the window, making haste to step back—he had been staring through the pane, perhaps had signaled. Twenty feet away, at the bar, stood Bob Wilcox with Full-House Cox, eyes on the entrance.

Menlo saw that the two unnamed punchers at the card table had not moved. Their attitude indicated they meant no trouble, and probably were not gunmen. Menlo knew the pair he would have to watch were Baca and Full-House Cox.

These two were widely separated. The Texan moved slightly to the left. Facing the bar, so that he could still observe any dubious move on the part of the half-breed, Menlo centered his gaze on the hairy individual. The fiery nose, beetle brows, the close-set yellowish eyes focused on the new arrival, the sandy beard reaching to the temples—all told Menlo he had made no mistake about the 'Dobe Tombs assassin.

They seemed in no hurry to contest his entry among them, and Menlo, after a long moment, moved to the back end of the bar, where Full-House and Baca would be in a line in front of him. Still they did not act. The barkeeper-proprietor, Hatch Lambert, fat, flabby-faced and aproned, left the glasses he had been wiping on the back bar, and leaned forward, hands on the groove, waiting. The newcomer ordered no drink. Bob Wilcox, supported by a hand on the top rail, was staring with fevered eyes on the intruder. The wait continued; the situation was demanding an explanation from the Texan. He said:

"Understand there's a hombre in here named of Full-House Cox that's anxious to have a chat with Menlo Dory," he said blandly. He did not remove his gaze from the hairy one.

The Bar W man shrugged. "Didn't know I was. Who said so?"

"A sparrow told me."

Full-House started slightly. "That sparrer lied," he grunted, exchanging a swift glance with Baca.

"Like to see you a minute in private, Cox," drawled Menlo easily, gesturing to a booth behind them.

"You kin go to hell!" The lynx eyes filmed over. "Wagon Rod kin state its message in public. Tell Lew Pardmore I said so!"

"In private," repeated the Texan meaningly, biding his time, knowing that whiskey had made the assassin reckless.

"You kin go to hell!" Full-House motioned to Lambert, called for another drink.

"The sparrow told me you wanted to try your gun-hand."

Full-House Cox stiffened, paused with the uplifted glass. His eyes drew from Menlo, suddenly evincing great interest in the Jinglebob entrance. This was not lost on the Texan. But if Full-House were expecting help, it had not yet come.

The bearded puncher's attitude changed abruptly. "That sparrer lied too," he said with a throaty laugh. He fidgeted at his neckerchief, to remove suspicion that he might use his gun-hand. "I ain't seekin' trouble. Least of all with you, bein' new. Fact is, I kinda like yuh, hombre—a man that kin handle a pistol the way you done with that snake Tevizon. Even if yuh did make a mistake and jine Wagon Rod. Hey, Hatch!" He motioned to the barkeeper, turned again to Menlo.

"What'll yuh have, Mister Dory?"

"Not drinking, thanks," returned the Texan coolly.

Full-House Cox shuffled nearer, along the bar-rail. "I'd like to see yuh jine Bill Wilcox's he-man riders, Mister Dory. From what I've heerd tell of yuh, Bill will be pleased to have yuh!" He extended a big hairy paw. Menlo ignored the offer, turned aside.

As he altered position, ostensibly off guard—an old trick of his ranger days—he saw the killer's hand dart toward his holster. Menlo was expecting some such treachery, nor was he wholly unprepared for the scene at the front end of the bar, by the window. The half-breed Baca was darting outward, stabbing for his gun.

The Texan's draw, a mere flicker of motion, was swift enough to halt the hand of Full-House in its awkward, blundering course. The assassin's fingers opened, claw-like, at his sides; he bent, froze, as though to ward off the blow. Menlo's weapon tilted slightly, sidewise, and blazed past Full-House toward the menacing figure of Baca. The jaw of El Montero locked, neck muscles corded, for the breed had risked the handle and full hip draw, counting on Menlo's double target. Baca's slanting big forty-five was a bull's eye—child's play for one who could cut the red from the ace of diamonds at twenty feet. It hurtled back against the pane noiselessly in the roar and the trailing tinkle of broken glass. Baca's hand was drawn back as from a serpent's sting with no

sign of red, as Menlo, with ready left, lifted the pistol of Full-House from its sheath.

"In private," murmured Menlo grimly. "I want to see you, Cox!"

As he uttered the words, the doors swung in enough to admit a youthful-looking cowboy's face. "Lew's aimin' to have Bill Wilcox arrested! Quit yore fool shootin', Full-House—"

Cox, "lickered up," had been doing some promiscuous practicing that morning at several places about town, Menlo learned afterward.

The messenger had cut short, stared, as he saw the Texan. His face withdrew quickly, and the two inoffensive card players, who had risen, backed out of the door. Baca withdrew with them. Menlo did not try to hold them, for reasons of his own.

"Now, Cox, get in there!" Menlo drove him to the open door of the nearest booth.

Bob Wilcox alone remained in the saloon with Hatch Lambert, the youth supporting himself by the bar, which told the Texan he must be very drunk indeed. Inside the little room, Menlo stepped to the rear wall, facing the door, and commanded Full-House to shut it.

"Cox, you're better with the rifle. Your shot down at 'Dobe Tombs put me on my back, but it didn't kill me, quite. Unbuckle that holster-belt!"

Full-House's lynx eyes popped at the accusation. "Honest, Mr. Dory," he muttered hoarsely, fingers at the buckle. "What's that fer?"

"Lay it down on the table; that's it!" Menlo leaned forward, shoved the confiscated six-shooter back into its sheath. "Buckle it on, and be careful where your fingers work!" Menlo holstered his own weapon. "Now I'll ask you to draw, so I can pay you off for that shot you fired in hiding, since you're hankering for a chance to show me your draw—"

"I ain't!" The hairy face twitched. "I never said I could beat yuh to the draw, Mr. Dory. I—"

"Go for your gun, Cox—or tell me the names of the other five that are mixed up in those 'Dobe Tombs murders. Pronto!"

Full-House swallowed. "I swear, Mr. Dory, I ain't in any killin's—"

"You're lying! I'll help you name 'em—Tevizon, Cox, Baca—and who's the other three? Say it, or go for your gun, if you don't want me to drill you where you stand!"

"I'll talk!" Full-House threw out his hands, frightened. "If you let me off easy. They're aimin' to git you down to the Tombs again, and—"

The Texan's hand flashed to his gun, but not at the words of the hairy assassin. His weapon covered the entrance. Only an unexplainable impulse withheld pressure on the trigger. The door had opened a matter of inches and a pistol barrel was in the opening, muzzle on the Van Horn man, a pair of eyes behind it. As the aperture widened, Menlo saw the flushed countenance of Bob Wilcox.

"No," grunted the young man, in a thick voice, "you won't tell him

anything, Full-House." He laughed bitterly, and Menlo saw that he was not too drunk to think clearly. "Today we clean up Wagon Rod and their hired gunmen, after that raid, and we might as well start in right now!"

He flung back the door full, lunged uncertainly on his legs in the entrance. "I watched you riding into town with Miss Jean, you damned interloper! Coming here to steal a man's girl, are you? I'll teach you!" His thin lips twitched; his flushed eyelids narrowed over inflamed eyeballs. "You can't run any blazer on me, hombre! I've heard a lot about you, ever since you've been hanging around the Pardmore place, you and Jean with your heads together, morning, noon and night! You can't come here and cut out a Wilcox, hombre, when it comes to her!" His gun was fairly steady, and Menlo did not doubt that Bob Wilcox was an average shot.

El Montero might have beaten him still, but he dared not shoot a drunken man—and Bob Wilcox's gun was in front of him, where it could not be hammered from his hand with a bullet without killing him. Yet if he did not act, Full-House Cox, now armed again, would find his opportunity. In the midst of these swift reflections that open door revealed the darting figure of a little man with a flat nose and chin-strap, clearing the main entrance into the Jinglebob.

Tevizon had come, heeled and gun in hand; and the Texan recalled how Full-House had watched the front door a few minutes before, expecting him. Tevizon was late, but it was a plant, and fate had given the little outlaw a better setting than he would have had earlier.

The border killer had fought Full-House Cox when he had first come to town, Pardmore had said, winning his job on the Wagon Rod. But they were no longer foes, if they had ever been. Tevizon's deep-set, reptilian eyes had sweep the saloon and went to the open booth. His gun tilted instantly.

10

There was no choice; Menlo Dory drew.

Ignoring the peril of Full-House Cox, in the narrow booth to the left of him, and the drink-inflamed, jealous young Wilcox in the center of the doorway, the Texan faced the greater menace of Tevizon, whose left hand had whipped out its weapon to the accompaniment of his right at sight of the man he sought.

Guns would have spoken then but for the swaying figure of Bob Wilcox, blundering back a step, immediately in the doorway. Menlo realized he was screened by the boy's body. Tevizon, for the instant, was out of range, except for feet and one arm, moving toward the booth.

In the brief period of the killer's sudden appearance in the Jinglebob, the significance of the act was not lost upon Menlo Dory. Tevizon, although of the Wagon Rod, had come to lend a hand to Full-House Cox and Baca of the Bar W. The Jinglebob bar, he knew, had not been a hangout of the Wagon Rod, but of the Wilcox outfit. The lines that had been drawn since the feud were fast disintegrating; the renegades of both outfits were uniting. Jean was right. And that introductory fight between Tevizon and Cox had been staged for a purpose.

Sight of Menlo's drawn forty-five did not tame the angry, unreasoning Bob Wilcox; his own gun remained on the Texan menacingly, and Menlo dared not shoot him. Full-House Cox stood with furtive eyes on his foe, his hairy right paw creeping toward his holster, inch by inch, ready for the stab. Menlo was not blind to that fact, but his eyes watched the space of light at the left of Wilcox; Tevizon's anatomy was partly visible, but in no vital spot, as he crouched forward. Menlo's words rattled across his lips:

"I'll kill you, Cox, if your hand moves an inch!" He knew how futile it would be to argue with jealous, drink-blinded young Wilcox, but he risked a sentence: "You're wrong, Bob, about me trying to take your girl—"

"You lie! Drop that gun, or I'll plug you! Drop it!" Bob's six-shooter muzzle jabbed toward the Texan like a serpent's head. Menlo realized the danger, what whiskey would do if he did not obey, yet he dared not drop his gun, dared not use it. The boots of Tevizon told him that the little gunman was within ten feet behind Bob.

"Drop it!" The boy's hand hardened, knuckles stuck out, as he tightened on the pistol stock. Menlo looked past him.

Suddenly the Texan's voice cracked: "Don't do it, Tevizon! If you shoot Bob, I'll drop you, sure!" It was a ruse that had worked before. Bob Wilcox lurched, turned awkwardly and staggered back, his inflamed eyes wide, nearly sober at last. His gun circled around to face the new foe.

That act prevented the play of pistols between the flat-nosed puncher and Menlo Dory, for Tevizon had halted, a moment confused, at the new attack. The Texan's left arm swept upward; Bob's Colt was jerked away. Tevizon was facing the blue-steel barrel of the ex-ranger's forty-five.

The little gunman's jaw tightened on the chinstrap; his deep-set eyes blinked in slow comprehension; his fingers released the trailing six-shooters and they slid to the floor. Menlo's gun went to Full-House, and the renegade found himself disarmed.

"Now I want to have a talk with you two!" Menlo motioned Tevizon within the booth, beside Full-House. "Bob, here's your gun." He slid it to him. "You better go home, pronto." He drew the door behind the now thoroughly sobered, though mystified, son of his old friend.

He gave his attention to the hairy one and the little gunman of the flat nose.

"Skag Garone is wanted for a bunch of murders," he said evenly, eyes on Tevizon.

The deadly eyes glowed deeply, but there was no hint of panic in the hard face at this veiled accusation. "What's that got to do with me?" growled the disarmed puncher, his sun-cracked lips curving down.

"Might have something to do, Tevizon! I reckon you and your amigo here are through, so far as 'Dobe Tombs is concerned—"

The words were cut with a roar and splintered wood. Menlo's six-shooter leaped toward the door, through which the shot had bored a shattered hole in the flimsy, thin panel. An instant before, the Texan had thought he heard a soft scraping of boots on the outside of the booth. He did not wait for a second shot, but fired at the spot from whence the gun-blast had come. Darting forward then, he kicked open the door, in time to see the fleeing figure of a man vanishing through the front swing doors. He heard Full-House's low whisper, "Baca!"

Menlo did not follow; he decided to leave the booth door open, risking Hatch Lambert's none too trustworthy eyes and ears. At that moment two burly figures stamped into the saloon—strangers to Menlo. On the forward one's shirt the Texan saw a sheriff's star. That worthy strode rapidly toward the booth, his companion at his elbow. Menlo slowly sheathed his gun.

"Yo're under arrest," barked the sheriff, eyes taking in the situation. His big Colt was in his hand. "Take his guns, Clem! This damned promiskerous shootin' has got to stop!"

"Better not take *my* gun; you're welcome to these extra three," remarked the Texan dryly, as Clem Chafee, sheriff's deputy, followed orders.

"Take 'em all, Clem, especially *that* one!" The sheriff's Colt was elevated menacingly. Menlo yielded his. Clem handed it back to Langley, who smelled of the muzzle, scanned the chambers. "There's too damned many reckless gunmen bein' imported into this country, and citizens are forcin' my hand. You come with me!"

"What charge?"

"Disturbin' the peace!"

"What peace? You don't call it peace they've been having around here, do you, Sheriff?" drawled Menlo, to whom being disarmed was a new sensation. "You didn't arrest that hombre that tried to pot me, did you?"

"We'll get him!" snapped Langley, whose gruff, ferocious mien belied the vacillating nature of the man. A crowd was now beginning to congregate, at this sudden display of authority on the part of the sheriff. The onlookers emboldened him. He produced handcuffs. "Come, or I'll snap 'em on!"

"I'll be peaceable as a lamb!" Grinning, the Texan followed the two out, to meet Pardmore and York. The Wagon Rod owner interceded. "You ain't got any right to take a Wagon Rod man, Sheriff, when you ain't laid a hand on them Bar W's—Full-House and Baca. I'll vouch for that pris'ner—put up bond, if needed."

"We'll see." Langley shoved his way through the dozen spectators, strode across the street with Clem and Menlo. Pardmore and York followed in. In the sheriff's office Langley began to search the prisoner for knives, guns or what not. He lifted out a folded sheet of paper from Menlo's shirt pocket.

"I'll trouble you not to take that," said the Texan quietly. "It's private."

"Is it? Mebbe it'll show somethin' about what you gunmen are doin' around here!" He jerked it open.

Menlo with a long reach seized it, tore it into a dozen pieces.

"Yo're defyin' the law!" roared the sheriff. "Gather up them pieces, Clem, and patch 'em together!"

"Now, lookee here!" It was Lew Pardmore who spoke, placing an easy hand on the sheriff. "This man is my friend; he ain't a trouble-maker; he's workin' to find out who done them murders, the same as you are doin'. You're hatchin' trouble, Sheriff, if yo're goin' to continue to discriminate against the Wagon Rod!"

"Who's discriminatin'?"

"You are. You haven't given an answer yet about servin' that warrant on Wilcox."

"I ain't servin' the warrant you ask," retorted the sheriff gruffly. "Even if you accuse me of bein' a Wilcox man. Bill accuses me of bein' a Wagon Rod partisan! Read this." He yanked out a sheet of paper. "It's a warrant for yore arrest, signed by Bill Wilcox!"

While Pardmore, astonished, scanned the contents, the sheriff resumed coolly, "Show's there's two sides to this ruckus. Fact is, I've had a warrant for yore arrest longer'n you swore out the one for Bill. I'm servin' neither. This ain't the way to hold down my job as sheriff, and I don't aim to git defeated next election, either!" He wagged his head after this frank exposition of his stand. "Things is in bad enough shape now, with me not even able to git up a posse, without includin' both Wagon Rod and Bar W, and them two won't hitch." He eyed his deputy. "What's it say, Clem?"

Clem had been busy with a paste bottle, and his eyes indicated a big discovery. He read aloud the letter from Bill Wilcox, revealing Menlo's double role of friend of Bill Wilcox and containing the reference to El Montero, which was not lost on Sheriff Langley, though Lew Pardmore had never heard the name. But Pardmore's face darkened swiftly.

"So yo're workin' for the skunks we're fightin', Mister Dory," he

grated angrily, "while you was pretendin' to be a loyal friend of the Wagon Rod? And us harborin' a spy, for more'n two weeks, and not knowin' a thing about it!" The large brown eyes snapped in wrath. "I'm glad we found it out—before it's too late!"

11

MENLO DORY was to do a lot of riding the remainder of that day, even though he surrendered the horse he had been using to Lew Pardmore. He hired another, from the stables in Ranger, and made ready to travel to the Bar W, for the long-delayed meeting with Bill Wilcox. Sheriff Langley, patting a fat pocket bulging with cigars, had quietly announced to Menlo that he had changed his mind about holding him.

The day was yet early—ten o'clock of a scorching hot morning—when the Texan, after a bite to eat at Chink Yin's restaurant, took the saddle for Bar W, eight miles from Ranger, due east, where Hidden Valley met the foothills of the lower Santa Isabel range. His horse, a wiry dun-white pinto, was fresh, and Menlo counted on making the distance within the hour. The trail was deserted; the Texan did not know what had become of Bob Wilcox, whether he had gone home or remained in town, but he hoped he might run into him, to tell him some things. There was a chance he might encounter Full-House Cox or Baca at the Wilcox place; if so, he would be ready.

Halfway out he passed a horseman coming in. The puncher returned a civil nod, but when the first rise had been passed and Menlo turned, he saw the rider streaking back toward the Bar W, at a tangent.

"Thought so," grinned Menlo. "He'll break the news about me." The Texan knew he had been marked as the latest Wagon Rod gun-fighter; it was yet too early for the news to have traveled about his discharge by Pardmore.

His guess about the Bar W rider was correct, for when he rode up to the Wilcox house he found a half-dozen cowhands standing about awaiting his arrival. Some of these had undoubtedly chased the raiders the night before, though Menlo had seen none of them in the Jingle-bob. They were a silent, efficient-looking lot, and one of their number, clean-shaven and square-jawed, strode forward as the newcomer dismounted.

"We ain't takin' on any hands, stranger," he said shortly.

"Where'll I find Mr. Wilcox?"

"I'll take any mesage to him. "What's yore name?"

"Dory."

The spokesman, who Menlo learned later was Wilcox's foreman, Getty, an able and fearless cowman, walked toward the house, to a corner room whose door was propped open. A horse was standing by

the gallery, and Menlo heard the murmur of voices within. A moment later the rotund figure of cherub-faced Bill Wilcox appeared at the door.

There was no look of recognition, no welcome from the Texan's old friend. Wilcox spoke to the message-bearer, and the latter motioned Menlo toward the house. At that juncture a cowboy emerged and took the saddle of the waiting horse.

Bill Wilcox motioned the Texan within, as though he were a complete stranger. But once in the room the Bar W man's broad face lighted, blue eyes twinkling, as he reached forth both hands.

"Doggone my hide! How are you, anyhow, after bein' shot by them Pardmore snakes? Couldn't get over to see you—you know why! Didn't want to let on to them outside, just now, that I ever knowed you, Menlo. Yore trip here in the middle of the day is bound to cause talk as it is—mebbe hurt what yo're doin' at the Wagon Rod. What brung you? But before you say it, I just got a pack of excitin' news. You notice that rider that just left?"

Menlo nodded, while he quickly surveyed his friend, a florid, good-natured cowman of forty odd who in the seven years since Menlo had seen him had changed considerably as to size, and he always was big. Now he was immense, and must have cut a nearly ludicrous figure in the saddle. Yet his outdoor life had hardened him, so that he was not so rotund about the middle as he would otherwise have been. But Bill Wilcox was the same inwardly, the Van Horn visitor reflected—big-hearted, trusting, generous, ready to fight a foe or help a friend; his kindly face and eyes revealed the fact. Now he chuckled.

"Danged glad you come now, anyhow, 'spite of what them boys has to say about a Wagon Rod gunman payin' calls!" Wilcox's eyes sobered. "I ain't told you the news that rider brung. I've had him layin' out on the ridge watchin' since the raid last night—Wagon Rod thieves tried to run off a bunch of my steers. Well, the cowboy was on guard, and about an hour ago saw a Pardmore pair ridin' down to the 'Dobes. One of 'em took both hosses back, leavin' the other hombre in one of them shacks."

The Texan forgot many of the things he wanted to say in greeting. "That's important," he affirmed seriously. "You sure it was Wagon Rod men?"

"Shore! Who else? He saw the brand of their hosses, and recognized the one that stayed. If I ain't mistaken"—he lowered his voice—"it was Skag Garone himself!"

"Meaning Tevizon?"

"You ain't been at Pardmore's house all this time without findin' out, Menlo! The skunk that's paradin' under the name of Tevizon, shore enough."

The Texan's light eyes flickered. "We're right, Bill, about Tevizon,

I reckon. So he's gone down to the 'Dobes alone, eh? What were you planning to do?"

"Go get him! Minute you come in, I was givin' orders. Now yo're here you might as well join us, and we'll smoke out that killer pronto, and he won't have a chance to use either a rifle or a six-gun on you again, Menlo!"

"Listen, Bill." The Texan swung into a chair, motioned the other down. "I've got a lot to say—I'll talk fast. First place, I'm not with Wagon Rod any more—Pardmore found out. Took my horse. I figured it was time to come and see what you know. Don't expect to ride for Bar W, because of reasons of my own. I'll ride free. Got to work between here and Wagon Rod, and at 'Dobe Tombs, to get those killers. I've spotted the bunch." His voice dropped low. "Some of them are your own men."

"My men!" Bill Wilcox was out of the chair, eyes glinting, lips tightening. "Yo're wrong."

"I saw the hombre that shot me, Bill. Full-House Cox."

"Nope, I can't believe it! Good Lord, what makes you think any fool thing like that?"

"Saw him—when he dragged me in, just before I went out. There was a chance his pal fired the shot—Baca—but I'm ninety-nine per cent sure it was Cox—"

"Baca!" barked the cowman. "Yo're wrong, Menlo—wrong. *I sent them two down to the 'Dobes that mornin' myself.*"

"Mebbeso. Those two have been playing you, Bill—the same as Tevizon and his amigos have been playing Pardmore. I've found out that neither Pardmore nor his regular hands have been mixed up in these killings and stealings, but a bunch of renegades imported here by both outfits. They're playing a long game, at those 'Dobes—don't know exactly what, unless it's to run off both your herds, but—"

"Yo're dreamin', Menlo, deamin'! Full-House aint an importee—neither's Baca. They've been here for years. As good men as we've got. I sent 'em down to the Tombs that mornin' to try to run out them killers. Chances are they got there, Menlo, right after you was shot, and that's how you seen Full-House."

Menlo Dory smiled sourly. "Not any. They worked with Tevizon this mornin' at the Jinglebob, Bill—and tried to kill me. You don't know that little game—"

Wilcox raised a hand. "I know somethin' about it. Bob was here a half an hour ago. He told me about that ruckus. Full-House didn't know you was a friend of his boss, workin' on the Wagon Rod under cover. Neither'd Baca. Neither'd Bob, for that matter. I kept that dark, Menlo—except I had to tell Carl Sands because I couldn't meet you with those instructions, and Carl is a friend. Full-House and Baca might have tried to get you, true enough, you bein' a Wagon Rod

gunman. The fools—I'd have given 'em hell if I'd knowed it. Bob told me you run a blazer on him." Bill Wilcox chuckled. "Fool kid—he's all broke up over the Pardmore girl—been drinkin' heavy. I'm glad he didn't make you trouble, Menlo. Bob is sore at you—I'll tell him about the play soon's it's safe. Sore because he thinks you've been shinin' up to that girl. Dang it! So yo're out with Pardmore? And was adopted by him, taken right into the family! Reports sayin' you was likely to carry Lew's daughter, even!" His chuckle died, and a slight frown broke on the ruddy countenance. "There ain't any truth in that—yore payin' attentions to Jean Pardmore, Menlo?—I thought not." He face lighted. "Bob was drinkin'! How in mischief did Lew find out who you was?"

"Don't know," evaded Menlo, resolved to hold silence about the letter falling into the sheriff's hands. Bill Wilcox was still blinded by the feud spirit.

"So far as yore dopin' it out that my men have been mixed in these killin's, Menlo, yo're dead wrong. Stick here a week, ride with us, and yo'll have yore eyes opened."

"It may not take a week," said the Texan softly. "If Tevizon's down there now, things will likely happen *today*. I'll ride along—no time to lose."

"Shore—that fits in—except we'll go 'long!" Bill Wilcox strode toward the door, raising his voice for Getty. Menlo halted him.

"You know there's no use in a bunch going to the draw, Bill, don't you? It's been tried a dozen times."

"You mean—" Wilcox stared, wavered; brushed Getty back from the door when he came.

"I'm going down there, Bill, alone. If I don't get him, bring your bunch. If you don't hear from me in a couple of hours, you come. That fair?"

Bill Wilcox reluctantly admitted that it was. The Van Horn man rode toward the Tombs.

12

MENLO jogged up the slope close to the Tombs, and when near the crest dismounted and went the remaining distance on foot. As his eyes swept the range northward his jaw dropped, in slow amazement. Jean Pardmore and Bob Wilcox, with a third rider whom he did not recognize at that distance, were traveling steadily from the old forked roads to the edge of 'Dobe Tombs draw. While the Texan watched, they reached the head of the sink, bent their course slightly, and then dropped into the draw, headed directly for the Tombs, less than a mile away.

"What fool move is that?" thought the Texan swiftly. He knew Tevizon was in the draw at that moment. It was not likely that the little gunman would offer violence to these three, but if interrupted in his plans there was no telling. Hurrying back to his horse, Menlo decided to head them off. Tevizon might have framed a lure to get Bob Wilcox; he probably had had a leading hand in the raid on the Bar W the night before, and might be planning another this night by shooting Bob, drawing Bar W men to the Tombs, and running off Wilcox's herds during the excitement.

As Menlo swung into the saddle, he saw the bald-headed cowboy on the opposite slope, sitting on his knees, waving his big hat frantically.

There was no doubt he was waving to Menlo, and the Texan swept down the dip and up the hill toward him. Leaving his mount under the crest, the Van Horn man approached the stranger on foot, where it was obvious the latter had been doing his watching under cover. Menlo recognized the messenger rider who had come and departed at the Bar W, the one who had brought news to Bill Wilcox of the presence of Tevizon in the draw.

"Come yere, cowboy!" shot out the bald-headed one, moon eyes on the Texan. "You ain't riding a Wagon Rod hoss—yo're the hombre I seen goin' in to talk to Bill Wilcox when I left. Me, I'm Dick Berry, and I don't know who yo' are—"

"Name's Dory. You're the one who brought news about Tevizon," said the Texan hastily, for there was no time to lose.

"Yeah—Bill Wilcox told you, eh? Listen, I was yere watchin' to see if that killer left or what he done, when I seen Bob Wilcox and Miss Jean meetin' there at the forks—"

"Who's the other rider? Why are they going down into the draw?" snapped Menlo impatiently.

"That's jist it! Take a look through these glasses!" He extended his binoculars, and the Texan made haste to use them.

"Careful! Don't let Tevizon see yuh!" warned Dick Berry, creeping up beside the Texan. "You see anythin' funny about the way that girl sets her hoss?"

"She's tied, stirrup to stirrup," commented Menlo grimly. "Tell me quick, what happened there at the forks?"

"I was watchin' Tevizon, like Bill told me to do till he come. That skunk is still in that lower 'dobe. Lew Pardmore's bunch is back there"—gesturing far to the left—"workin' with the herd they're gettin' ready to ship. Along comes Bob, and I trains my glasses on him, thinkin' he might be goin' to hunt Tevizon, fool drunk. Then I see Miss Jean ridin' and Bob waitin' at the forks. They didn't have time to say two words when they come together till two hombres rises out of that clump of cedars by the forks and sticks 'em up. The girl fights like a badger,

scratchin' and clawin', in spite of their guns; then they ties her. I was plumb 'stonished—"

"Quick—that rider one of 'em?"

"Yeah. I trains my field glasses on 'em, and make out the faces of Full-House Cox and Baca—I never trusted that 'breed a minute from the time I first set eyes onto him—that's Baca takin' 'em down to the 'Dobes now! Pris'ners!"

"Prisoners," murmured the Texan, bolting back toward his horse. "Where'd Full-House go?"

"Dropped behind the cedars," puffed the bald-headed one, following down the slope.

"Stick here," commanded the Texan sharply. "Use your glasses. I may need you yet. Might be a lot of grief before I get through!" He took the saddle. Raking the wiry paint horse, he crossed the rise at a dead run.

Fortunately he was able to bend his course aslant of the draw, out of effective rifle range of the 'dobe houses in which Tevizon lurked. Taking a direct line southwest, he aimed to cut off the trio before they had progressed to within twelve or thirteen hundred yards of the shacks, which spelled safety so far as a reliable target for Tevizon was concerned. The little gunman's turn would come after this business was disposed of.

He galloped down the gentle slope of the wide draw, on a beeline for the two captives and their custodian, the half-breed Baca. Now in the open, he knew by the excited actions of Baca that his purpose was suspected. The breed was crowding Bob Wilcox's horse, urging a swifter gait. Baca held the reins of Jean's mount, pulling the animal and the girl rider with him. The Texan saw that her hands were free; only her boots were roped to the stirrups and across, under the cinches; but that was enough to hold her.

He did not spare the rowels, moderate as he usually was in the use of the spur. By now he was certain Tevizon must have seen him. His gaze swept the 'dobes; the little gunman was staying out of sight, but there was no doubt he was posted so that he could watch the approach of Baca and his charges. One thing gave Menlo satisfaction—the flat-nosed killer would be without a horse to go to the aid of Baca. This was the natural surmise if Tevizon were lying in wait for someone, in hiding, at the Tombs. Mysterious as had been the sudden disappearances at the two shacks, it was out of reason to expect a horse to be secreted there.

Menlo would have liked to ask Dick Berry a number of questions—whether he had seen Tevizon dispose of his horse further back, among others—but there had not been time. Just now his attention was centered on Baca's efforts to outrun him to the adobes with the captives. The Texan swerved slightly more westward, to head them off com-

pletely, risking a chance shot from the hiding gunman. Only an accident would enable Tevizon to hit him at that distance.

Bob Wilcox, in the lead, pressed by the Bar W half-breed, was riding obediently at a lope, unbound, Menlo noted. Jean seemed helpless, her hands reainless.

Abruptly, without slackening his pace, the Texan's intent gaze fell on a movement that caused him to lean forward and to squint, amazed, through the glare of the midday sun. He was not mistaken; Jean's right foot, stockinged and bootless, was free from the stirrup. A dozen strides farther, and he beheld her supple figure rise from the saddle. She was on the ground, and running backward.

A shout of exultation rose to Menlo's lip's at the skill with which Jean had freed her feet from the tied tan boots and left the convoyed animal. She was a horsewoman! At that instant Baca realized what had happened; he jerked his mount back on its haunches, dropped the reins of Jean's horse and turned his own broncho in pursuit. Bob Wilcox, too, had halted in uncertainty.

Riding furiously now, Menlo beheld the unequal race in the trough of the draw. Jean was quick, athletic, an excellent runner, but handicapped in stockinged feet on rough, thorny ground, and of course no match for a horse. As Baca drew down on her, gesturing, bellowing, as the faint sounds floating to the Texan's ears gave evidence, she did not slacken her gait, even though the enraged breed might be threatening to shoot. Menlo saw the man circle his rope, let fly, and halt suddenly.

The Texan's lean jaw drew taut at sight of the cruel rope that settled over the girl's shoulders and yanked her brutally to the ground, as Baca might have thrown an outlaw horse. The range was wide for a pistol, but Menlo fired from the saddle, without slackening his pace. At that moment he saw a horse break over the crest of the rise directly opposite. A suggestion of a hairy face told Menlo the newcomer was Full-House Cox. He was tearing downward toward Baca and the prostrate girl. The breed had turned and began dragging his captive back toward her grazing horse.

Menlo's shot, as he had expected, had done no damage. He would be within shooting distance in another two minutes. While he would have preferred to take Baca captive and force from him a confession of the whole performance and what was back of it, his brain burned with the man's brutality and the old bloodhound instinct clamored for swift punishment.

He glanced once toward 'Dobe Tombs, and that glance revealed the squat figure of Tevizon in the ruined doorway of the lower shack, his sombreroed head thrust forward.

Menlo dismissed him; he was too far away now to be a factor without a horse. The Texan saw Jean's hands struggling to hold the rope

as Baca dragged her, and he breathed a sigh of relief; she had not been injured to the point of unconsciousness. Baca was dismounting, near where Jean's horse idled. Menlo smiled grimly; the breed would never succeed in tying her to the animal again. He laid his hand on his gun-butt.

At that instant Baca paused, his gorilla arms about the girl. Instead of attempting to get her into the saddle again he held a crouching position on the ground, the girl in front of him, and opened fire.

The Texan reined short, as the singing ball tore his saddle leather. Dangerous as the double target was, Menlo was confident he could find an opening behind the living shield, given time, for the girl was struggling with her captor. The Texan saw her hands—both of them—wrench at the breed's pistol. That act had prevented a second shot, and the Texan streaked forward at a gallop.

He saw Baca's crooked arm about Jean's throat; her hands loosened from the big revolver, and the breed raised it again. Menlo's own weapon was unsheathed, leveled, but there was no opening—no way to reach a vital spot in the man without shooting Jean. The Texan hugged his bronco's mane and raked his flanks, leaning low. Conscious that Full-House Cox was now within pistol range, he was bent solely for the moment on silencing the renegade nearest at hand. The half-breed's gun roared a second time, and Menlo drove a bullet to the spot whence it had been fired, as the leaden slug whistled at his ear.

Out of the tail of his eye Menlo had seen Bob Wilcox break and ride up the slope. Full-House Cox had swung down, to mask himself behind his horse. This act, and the menace of the Texan, was giving Bob his chance to escape. The half-breed, holding his position behind Jean, had not fired since the shot of the Van Horn newcomer. Menlo understood the reason: he had hit Baca, could not have missed a mark as plain as the man's shoulder as it had jutted around the prisoner girl. Then the breed's one arm, the left, raised above the young woman's head. It told Menlo that Baca could not have raised the right arm in token of surrender even if he had tried. The Texan, ignoring the breed for the time being, swerved toward the horse behind which Full-House had bulwarked himself. He rode Indian style, body swung far out at the side of his paint pony, gun weaving under the animal's neck.

Full-House Cox did not fire; there was no target save the pinto horse, Menlo knew, from the manner of his riding. And a slain animal, a motionless carcass, would have given the Texan a better shield than his living mount. Full-House was keeping himself well masked behind his own horse, save for his legs, and Menlo did not waste lead. The Texan bore down on the hairy-faced assissin, remembering that first day at the Tombs when the bearded one had shot him after killing Flem Jones.

As Menlo curved about his game, Full-House jerked up his hands

behind the horse, the sign of surrender. The move was not unexpected by Menlo since the example set by Baca, who continued to stand beside Jean Pardmore with his one arm raised, the other limp. Jean too was standing now, making no effort to flee since the arrival of the Texan. Bob Wilcox had dropped from sight over the crest of the nearest slope.

The ex-ranger quickly disarmed the two Bar W renegades. His first words were addressed to Jean: "Are you hurt, miss?"

"No, Mr. Dory." Her eyes were misty with gratitude. "You are a very brave man." She turned her gaze toward the rise behind which Bob Wilcox had disappeared. Menlo, sober-faced, whirled on Baca and Full-House, now standing sullenly together.

"You've got one minute to talk!" he said sharply. "Who put you up to this, and why?"

Full-House scowled darkly. "We was workin' alone for Bill and Bob Wilcox, helpin' Bob to take this filly so's they could be married."

"That is a lie," affirmed the girl quickly. "Bob had nothing to do with it, I could tell by the way he acted, even if he was a—afraid. They were using us, taking us to the adobes for some reason—probably to lure both outfits here, while they and their friends ran off our herds. They would likely keep it quiet until dark."

"Your minute's about up—talk fast, Cox!" Menlo cut off, as a rifle report echoed from the adobes in the draw below them. A spent ball thudded against Baca's horse, near where Jean was standing; the animal reared, came down wild-eyed. The bullet had struck the saddle fender.

A second report, and a puff of dust at their feet. The Texan's eyes were on 'Dobe Tombs. Tevizon was not in sight, but shooting from the lower shack, Menlo knew. At that fourteen hundred yards a bullet would kill, though the outlaw's aim would be uncertain. Menlo thought of the danger to Jean.

"Get on your horses," he ordered the kidnapping pair. "Can you ride, Miss Jean?"

For answer she ran to her pony and mounted, while Full-House and Baca sullenly climbed into their saddles. A rider came loping down from the slope at the east. A glance told Menlo it was Dick Berry, the bald-headed watch.

Taking the saddle, the Texan drove the two renegades before him up the draw, motioning to Berry to cut over that way. Jean rode beside him, in silence. When completely out of range of Tevizon's rifle, Menlo ordered the prisoners down, cut Baca's saddle-rope, bound their arms securely behind their backs and turned them over to Dick Berry as the puncher joined them.

"Stand guard over 'em till I get back," directed Menlo. "Don't take

'em to Bar W, or they'll outlie me and you both, and Bill will turn 'em loose again to do more devilment. I'll look after them after I settle with their *jefe* down there," gesturing toward the Tombs. "Miss Jean, I reckon it'll be safe for you to ride back to the Wagon Rod from here; don't you think it will?"

13

DORY traveled at an angle, to cross the rise where a curving knoll within the draw would screen him for a time, until he reached a point between the two adobes, directly in their rear. After a few minutes he had moved as far as the grassy swell would hide him; he paused at the open dip leading down to 'Dobe Tombs, three hundred yards ahead. Tevizon was either within one of the houses or watching in front; the rear was clear.

Menlo's lanky legs broke into a swift run, directly for the assassins' lair; he was not deluded into thinking that the rear would be wholly unguarded; Tevizon at any minute might make a sally around the corner of one of the shacks, and with the rifle he would have the advantage over Menlo until the latter drew nearer. Hence the Texan sprinted at his best to lessen the hazard, prepared to draw his gun when at shorter range and to slow up for a contest of wits, speed and accuracy.

A hundred feet he had traveled when a low whistle reached his ears from behind. Expecting a ruse, he turned swiftly, and his gun was drawn. He beheld Sheriff Langley, on foot, at the edge of the knoll. The lawman was motioning him back.

Menlo realized he was exposed to rifle attack from the adobes; he must either go on, quickly, or get out of the open. Impatient at the intrusion of Langley, he turned back and drew the sheriff behind the screen of the swell.

"Tryin' to beat me to it?" grinned the sheriff, with an unpleasant insinuation.

"Beat you to what?" rapped the Texan.

"The reward." Langley hitched at his cartridge belt. "I was goin' to pull this trick myself, hearin' from Bill Wilcox Tevizon was holed up in them 'dobes, and knowin' said Tevizon is Skag Garone, from yore letter. And Bill didn't deny he's Skag, either, so I come on to git him. Didn't even bring my deputy, knowin' if we tried a two-handed game Tev would go in his hole and we never would find him. I've led four bunches again them 'dobes right after a killin' and never found a trace. So I come alone, and yere I see you, stealin' my trick!"

"Why don't you aim to get him in town?" demanded Menlo dryly.

"He ain't going to be in town no more; he's aimin' to beat it, tonight, with Lew Pardmore's herd!"

"How'd you know that?" asked Menlo quickly.

"I ain't tellin' all I know, Mistor Dory, onless you can show me yo're still a peace officer, which case I'll take you in and the reward splits."

"We're wasting time. I don't know of any reward. You'd better stay here, Sheriff, while I go down—"

"Not any! I ain't so easy sidetracked when I start out to take a man."

The Texan moved off. "I don't know your plans, Sheriff, but I aim to go down to the Tombs now, pronto. Come along, if you're set on it. We might get him from this side, before he knows our game." Menlo strode to the edge of the knoll, glanced down. The adobes lay peaceful, with no sign of habitation. Before them the Texan saw the distant figures of Dick Berry and his prisoners, and Jean was still with them. There was no time to lose; so long as Jean remained in the draw she was in danger. As Menlo started forward, he heard the sheriff's hoarse words:

"If that's yore play, the game's open, and may the best hombre cop the reward. If yo're goin' to run without cover, yo're a fool, and I'll take Skag Garone over yore dead carcass—" Menlo heard no more, for he was racing swiftly down the slope.

He had gone half of the three hundred yards with no rifle reception from the hiding outlaw. Approaching as he was from the middle of the two adobes, his eyes commanded the inner and outer corners of the buildings, ready for the slightest suspicious movement. His large forty-five was in his hand now, moving easily at the hip with his stride. Then, to the left of him, he was conscious of vague motion.

He glanced swiftly, risking the Tombs, under the impression that Sheriff Langley might be following. Since leaving him, Menlo had not looked back. But there was no sign of a man where the blur had moved.

A few steps farther, eyes again in front, told him there *was* motion. This time he risked a further interval from the adobes, and settled his gaze on a round-headed clump of shining dark leaves—a creosote bush of unusual size.

The bush moved forward.

The ruse that Sheriff Langley was employing was an old one. Menlo saw the tiny tree travel a few yards, then stop; he dismissed it from mind, and gave his sole attention to the nearby adobes ahead.

Through the hundred-foot space between the old houses, the advancing Texan saw the group in the upper draw, among them a hint of color that marked Jean Pardmore. He did not focus his gaze upon them, but watched with unwinking eyes the two innermost corners of the shacks, also the two at the outside. There was no telling whether Tevi-

zon had changed position and entered the upper house. The gunman's inactivity was becoming suspicious, particularly since he must have seen Menlo ride toward him from the group and cut up over the slope; Tevizon must have guessed his purpose. The creosote bush moved at Menlo's right; Sheriff Langley was making faster time now, evidently determined to beat the Texan to the reward, since his prophecy about going over Menlo's carcass was not being fulfilled.

The Van Horn man had no desire to outstrip the sheriff in reaching their quarry; Langley was entitled to all the glory he could get out of it—the reward, too, if such there was. But Tevizon's failure to appear at either of the corners of the houses warned Menlo the outlaw was following another course of attack, unless he was asleep, which was not likely. The Texan was unprotected by any screen save the adobe shacks themselves; he was now within twenty feet of the back walls, halfway between each house. This was as far as he had planned to go between the shacks, for if he advanced midway he could not keep an eye on both at once. He swung about and started for the east end of the lower adobe, from which he would work around to the front, commanding all corners as he did so.

He had gone less than a dozen steps when the angry snarl of a rifle burst on the torrid afternoon air. The Texan leaped; he saw the glistening green creosote bush waver and fall, and the dark form of the sheriff writhing. With a bound toward the side wall whence the shot had sounded, Menlo Dory strove to reach the assassin, his lean, lanky figure tense and vibrant, jaw outslung. His hand gripped the stock of his forty-five evenly, unexcitedly, and as he reached the corner he fired at the disappearing barrel of shining steel.

He did not stop, though the rifle had hurtled into the dust; he streaked along the dirty brown wall, gun up, reached the corner and fired at a pistol muzzle at the edge of the doorway at the instant that it belched smoke and spattered him with the dust of the adobe bricks.

Another long leap and he was at the threshold, Colt uplifted; then into the room. But his eyes did not find the killer they sought; the enclosure was empty, save for the bats at the ruined corner of a ceiling and the wood-rat's nest on the farther floor.

Though the man-hunter instinct of El Montero clamored for its prey, his veins chilled with the uncanny mystery of what his eyes had seen. It was at that very doorway that the revolver muzzle had greeted him. He made swift search, sprang into the sunlight once more, circled both houses, in the crouching attitude of the bloodhound, examined the interior of the upper shack, and backed away, pistol still drawn.

He lifted the fallen rifle as he went. Tevizon was now depending upon his six-guns alone. As Menlo backed away, bent on reaching the side of the wounded sheriff, he tensed anew at the distinct words that seemed to come out of the still, clear air of the draw:

"Come again, hombre, and meet Skag Garone!"

The lean jaw clicked as the Texan went backward at a long stride to where the sheriff lay behind the toppled creosote bush. A glance told the man-hunter that Langley was dead. Then, with his pistol in easy grip, El Montero of the border advanced again, and his face was not the calm, imperturbable countenance of the peaceable cattleman of Van Horn. It was bitter and ferocious.

14

As MENLO neared the rear corner of the lower adobe, eyes on the point where side wall and front met, he realized the danger of an attack from the rear, should Tevizon slip out and around the other walls. But there was no choice; to scale the wall of this shack would avail nothing; for the roof was intact two-thirds of its rear area; it was a flat roof, and Menlo knew his foe could not be hiding there. He must go to the front. His blood was up; and he was confident that in a match of quick vision and gun action he would not lose. Tevizon must see his mark before he could fire, and El Montero counted on seeing the killer first.

This was the opportunity for which he sought. He cleared the corner and made a quick sally along the dry dirt wall.

As he did so his gaze darted for an instant from the front corner to the upper draw. Dick Berry and his captives were stirring, as though in excitement, and Jean Pardmore was mounting. But the Texan's gaze flashed again to the corner which had screened Tevizon's last killing; he rounded it swiftly, reached the front. As he moved with more caution toward the fallen door, he heard the bantering words:

"Come in, Tehanno, come in!"

The taunt went home, two ways: to be challenged by a man under cover; to be called Tehanno by an Arizonan. Menlo was first, last and all the time a Texan, and not the poor trash given that appellation above the Rio Grande. He went in, with a bound, gun sweeping to the right, whence the sound had distinctly come.

The room was as empty of Tevizon as the second house of the twin 'Dobe Tombs a hundred feet away.

More so, for as the man-hunter, completely baffled, backed slowly away, expecting the earthen floor and the walls themselves to emit pistol-fire, he felt the searing, burning sting of a leaden missile in his left shoulder blade and his ears recorded the roar of a six-shooter from the upper shack.

He whirled, firing, in time to see the surprised face of the flat-nosed killer vanish at the ruined door-jamb. Heedless of the smart of a nicked bone in his back, the Texan swung forward, jaw set, eyes glinting the blue of ice, oblivious to the scene in the draw above him.

Reaching the door, he paused; there was nothing to tell him on which side stood the assassin, waiting for his entry, and without that knowledge the advantage would be with Tevizon—if Menlo went in as a man would ordinarily go.

The interior of the room was visible, save for the two forward walls and corners. El Montero went in with a backward, downward bound, turning as he lighted in the fashion of the Mexican tiger-leopard, gun uppermost as an animal's claws.

That trick, employed by the ex-ranger more than once on entering a room to take a man, would have ended the career of Tevizon had he remained; but the Texan's eyes beheld no target; the room was empty!

Chagrin but no defeat clouded the lined face of the veteran, who was on his feet now, backed to the farther wall, his eyes dilated on his surroundings. 'Dobe Tombs! They deserved the name. Little wonder that men had been slain here, men who knew how to use a gun; little wonder that all of Lew Pardmore's men, and those of Bill Wilcox, had been unable to run down the killers.

"Garone, I'm only beginning!" It was the first thought to which the Texan had given conscious utterance for many minutes. This was a game worthy of the old Hunter. He moved stealthily toward the opening again, and as he did so his eyes contracted, focused swiftly on the sun-bathed slopes of the upper draw.

Horses were moving there—four of them. Dick Berry was mounted, beside Jean, and behind them loped Full-House Cox and Baca, their prisoners. This was significant, that the prisoners should ride behind. But it was not this that caused the eyes of the Texan to harden; without the bald-headed puncher's binoculars Menlo perceived that the prisoners' arms were free!

On the instant, the distant calvalcade burst into a swifter pace; the explanation came to Menlo with the bobbing heads of horses on the rise far to southwest, from the direction of the Wagon Rod. Lew Pardmore's men were traveling; they broke into the draw, toward the Tombs.

Full-House Cox and Baca, with the cowboy and girl, had dropped from sight over the eastern rim of the draw—probably had made it before the Wagon Rod riders could see them. In some manner, the Texan knew, the outlaw pair had outwitted the gawky, easy-going Dick Berry and reversed the order of things, making their guardians their prisoners.

Menlo breathed a low expletive; his lips tightened. His choice was made. A brief two minutes before nothing could have taken him from 'Dobe Tombs without a termination of the man-hunt. Now it was but a matter of time until the Wagon Rod band would reach the Tombs; Tevizon probably had already seen them and would remain in hiding, peaceable as a lamb, to conceal his guilt from his trusting

boss, Pardmore. And Jean was now at the mercy of Full-House Cox and Baca, being carried off somewhere back of the Bar W line.

Oblivious to the sting of the bullet-jagged shoulder blade, the Texan emerged from the shack, edged to the far side of the adobe walls, and backed out into the open, eyes on the twin houses for a possible last-minute sally by Tevizon. He passed near where the sheriff had fallen—Pardmore's men would find the body—and went up the slope, still facing the adobes. He reached the knoll behind which he and Langley had conferred, and broke into a run for his horse.

But Menlo did not come upon the four riders as soon as he had hoped, and when he finally sighted them they were a good four miles ahead, and going at a surprising rate, with a handicap of two prisoners. In the faint haze of a middle afternoon dust storm that funneled up here and there on the mesa north of the Wilcox outfit, the Texan could not tell who was leading or trailing, but they were still four in number. Jean was among them, he knew.

Their position was significant, and caused the pursuer concern. Since leaving the draw they had curved away from the Bar W grazing range in Hidden Valley proper; were heading for the foothills that met the mesa east of the Santa Fe tracks. Easing off from the gallop, the Texan climbed the bluffs near the old cliff dwellings, taking a shorter course to intercept them. The fact that they were avoiding the Bar W, Ranger and all other settlements in the distant south bore out Jean's assertion that Bob Wilcox had nothing to do with the original attempt at kidnapping, as claimed by Full-House. As the dust haze cleared in spots, Menlo made a discovery: the outlaw pair were directing the flight in a wide semicircle, bending back across the tracks and toward the Santa Isabels where they spread out to the upper reaches of the Wagon Rod.

"Thought so," murmured the Texan grimly. "They're bringing 'em around to some holding-up place handy to Pardmore's other renegades, LaMotte, Tomlinson and Monk Baizee—and not leaving out Tevizon!"

The new course was to his advantage; he pressed into the swifter gait, to cut the arc of the circle; the chase would not be so long this way.

A sand-devil on the mesa cut them from view. When they emerged some minutes later the Texan squinted in surprise. There were but three. He was nearer now, enough to distinguish the foremost rider as Jean. The other two he was not sure of. But a moment later a riderless horse appeared farther to the east, and Menlo read its meaning.

"They've got rid of Berry; he must have been holding them back. I wonder if those devils could have—" He shuddered at the thought, hardened as he was to the deeds of border criminals. As he rode, his fears began to find corroboration, in the appearance of two dirty dots in the high heavens, winding and circling vultures, waiting the opportune moment to land. That had happened an hour before, on the

shooting of Langley. Menlo spurred forward toward the riderless horse, sacrificing pursuit for a time to verify his suspicions. After ten minutes he turned abruptly and bore down on the form of a man lying among the mesquite and sand.

"Hello, Dick." There was compassion in the Texan's voice as he stooped beside the man, whose brilliant eyes turned on him with their last latent luster before death. "Can I help a bit?" Menlo saw the two darkening holes in the breast, the oozing trickles that came from them.

"I'm done." Dick Berry smiled wanly. "Miss Jean and me held back—seein' you—and they shot, together. They want the girl—or they'd kill her, too."

Menlo pillowed the cowboy's head with a mound of sand and blamed himself for not having a canteen. "How'd they get loose, Dick?"

"My fault. Full-House argied he done it for Bob—takin' the girl. We seen Pardmore's bunch comin'—Full-House argied they'd shoot us all—me included, bein' Bar W—begged me to let 'em ride free so we all could escape." His eyes rolled. "Minute they was untied they took us . . . did you see they took Bob, too?"

"Took Bob? Who did?"

"Wagon Rod—looked like them new riders, Baizee, Tomlinson—over the hill . . . grabbed Bob right after you left. We could see it from where we was—I was a fool—listened to Cox when he said they'd get me, too . . . bein' Bar W. I dunno . . ." His voice trailed off, and he died, with a smile on his lips.

15

MENLO DORY straightened, his throat dry and tight over this latest range-war murder. The slight wound in his back began to pain him more, but he gave it little thought—had not even seen how badly the bullet had nicked his shoulder blade, judging it only by feel. Valuable time in the pursuit had been lost; but he took long enough to remove his saddle blanket and lay it over Dick Berry's face and hands, weighting it with sand. Cinching quickly, he mounted and spurred into a swift run, after taking the binoculars—he might need them.

Only for the fact that he had been heading off the fleeing trio in the curve they had been making, Menlo would have been left out of sight by this time. As it was, Cox and Baca were maintaining their circular course, and with the handicap of the girl prisoner they had gained but a slight mile. Their very persistence in bending back toward the Wagon Rod upper range told the pursuer they were striving to reach some rendezvous in the Santa Isabels, directly north of Chavez.

Again the Texan anticipated them, striking out on a direct course toward the rail shipping point. The mesa here was more broken, with

patches of higher growth, screw bean, amole, shin oak and occasional scrub cedar; yet Menlo kept the riders well in sight. That they knew of his pursuit was evident from their hurry and their frequent glances behind. Still they continued at an angle, so bent were they on reaching the great gash in the mountains north of Chavez, a canyon whose name Menlo did not know. The Texan gained steadily.

After another half-hour the trio abruptly dropped from sight, in a stretch of cedar. They had avoided Carl Sands' post at Chavez, had rounded into the cedars, probably to avoid Sands' keen eyes. But through the thin screen of the trees here and there the Texan marked their course, still bent for the canyon. Once they halted, and Menlo did not doubt they were watching his every move. Then they dashed forward at increased speed.

Satisfied that he could trail them into the canyon accurately now, the Texan determined upon a ruse. They had probably counted on the cedars throwing the pursuer off the track, giving the impression they were going into the mountains at that point. Menlo Dory swerved from his course and rode more leisurely toward Chavez, due west. This would make them believe he was through.

But he was not through; Chavez was but a mile away, little farther than into the canyon. Though the afternoon was well advanced and Menlo was anxious to reach both Pardmore and Wilcox with some things he had heard about the double conspiracy against their herds that night, he rode slowly and dejectedly—for a purpose—toward the flag station. His long frame was hunched forward and his shoulders sagged and his head drooped as he walked his mount westward. Eyes would see him, at least part of the way. The outlaws would enter the canyon more at ease.

Carl Sands was absent, and his store—a crude desert supply house from which Ranger freighted goods shipped in by rail—was locked. The Texan helped himself to a fresh horse from the corral, leaving his pinto, for, faithful as the pony had been, there was more hard riding ahead. Changing rigs and borrowing a saddle blanket for the one he had left with Berry, he swung up and started on a swift lope toward the canyon, to make up for lost time.

A quarter of a mile above he entered the mouth of the gorge and ran squarely into Sands. The bearded one's eyes popped as he drew up quickly.

"Gosh! Mighta knowd it! You'd be trailin' 'em. Right up Cow-Thief Canyon—yuh cain't miss 'em. I only went far enough to make sure. Mighta knowed—mighta knowed, Mister Dory, you'd be hot on their trail, to take Bob 'specially after yuh jined Bill Wilcox openly, with Pardmore findin' yuh out and—"

"Take Bob? What's that?" broke in Menlo.

"You know—or far be it fer me, always chose-mouthed, to say a

word!" He stared. "You don't mean, Mister Dory, yo're not trailin' that hombre and Bob?"

"What hombre?"

"Lew Pardmore's man, one of them new gunfighters he brung in—Monk Baizee. Him and Bob sneaked by, through the arroyo, less'n twenty minutes ago. I happened to see 'em, looked up—there's thieves ever'where these days—and follered, jist so's I'd know—"

The Texan turned ahead. "Listen, Sands! I've got a message for you to deliver to Lew Pardmore. Tell him to watch his herd tonight, tell him to watch, Tevizon, Tomlinson, LaMotte and that hombre Baizee. Tevizon was in the Tombs this afternoon and killed the sheriff. They're planning to run his cattle off tonight, tell him. Will you do that? And if I don't come back, tell him Cox and Baca of Bar W took Jean, but not to lay the blame on Bill Wilcox!"

"Wait a minute!" Carl Sands scratched his head furiously. "Lew won't believe a word from me, countin' me Bill Wilcox's friend, which I am—neutral, but sidin' with Bill in a pinch. And he 'specially won't believe it if he knows it come from you—he accusin' you as a spy, and all. Which ain't far from right, neither! I was jist down to see Lew, an hour ago, 'bout the shipment he's sendin' up here tonight. Told him to send a guard, too! Doggone! So that's where Jean is! No wonder Lew's bunch was out huntin' her; they was gittin' ready to move the herd when they found out Jean wasn't around nowheres, and started fer the 'dobes. They'd figgered she'd took a ride, and Lew's been keepin' his eye on his girl ever since this ruckus started. Cox an' Baca, eh? If Lew finds that out, he'd lead his whole bunch agin Bar W. There'll be—b-butchery!"

"Don't tell Pardmore about Cox and Baca, unless I don't come back—*this way!*" commanded the Texan earnestly. "If you can get hold of a rider—anybody—send him to Bill Wilcox, though, and tell him Baca and Full-House took Jean. Bill don't know a thing about that crime. And tell him Cox killed Dick Berry!"

"K-k-killed Dick Berry! Goshalmighty! I thought I knowed a lot, even if I wasn't talkin' what I knowed—"

"Time's short—*adois!*" Menlo rounded the dirt trail of Cow-Thief Canyon where it followed a miniature stream, and pressed his bronco into a gallop up the defile. Cox and Baca had entered the canyon about the time that Monk Baizee and Bob Wilcox had reached it. Sands had not seen the men and girl; otherwise he would have added to his budget of close-mouthed news. Now there would be three to fight—Baizee, Cox and Baca, for Menlo knew for certain that Bob and Jean were being taken to some canyon holing-up place, by prearranged plan.

He followed the trail of the fresh hoofprints in the canyon with ease.

Suddenly the clatter of racing hoofs echoed with a hollow note where

the walls of the canyon rose sheer and gloomy. Menlo drew up quickly, crossed his mount on the trail, and waited.

A moment later, where the lacy aspens tipped the sun, he caught the hairy visage of the 'Dobe Tombs assassin, behind a swiftly moving horse's outstretched head. The ringing hoofs told him there was another, and he glimpsed the swart countenance of the breed, Baca, as the gunman reached the leafy avenue.

Lifting his right foot from the stirrup and leaning forward from the saddle, the Texan advanced his six-shooter as the pair loomed into clear view. Full-House Cox yanked his mount back, fell into a walk, and continued to come on, down the canyon.

"Don't touch your gun!" warned the Texan meaningly. He met the animal eyes of Cox, and his gaze encompassed the rider's middle so far as the horse revealed it. He perceived the abrupt turn of Baca and the breed's rapid retreat up the trail, but his attention was centered wholly on the hairy one. Suddenly Cox ducked, behind the off side of his horse, and his gun-barrel glinted beside the animal's throat-latch. Menlo bent, waited for the eyes to appear to find their target, conscious that Baca was traveling along the rim of the gorge above and behind him, for he heard the stumbling, sliding hoofs.

"Drop your pistol, Cox—!"

The lynx eyes appeared as the hatless, brushy head whipped around the bronco's neck, and Menlo saw the steel glitter in motion, the black bore lurch. A crash, a burning slug of lead, was the Texan's answer.

Heedless of the burly form that slumped to the trail, foot still caught in the stirrup of the restless cow-horse, the ex-ranger turned in the saddle, toward the rim of the canyon above. Baca had made good headway, and Menlo saw him riding at killing speed as his pony reached the solid trail in the gorge below.

"Gone!" The Texan's lips tightened; he checked the impulse to pursue. Jean was above them, with Bob Wilcox, still in the hands of the third member of the party. He left the stirrups, gave the fallen Full-House Cox a single glance—eyes on the clean hole in the grimy forehead. There was a feeling of revulsion, momentarily—Menlo had never got over that feeling. But this was the murderer of the kid Flem Jones, perhaps of others—and the hairy man who had laid the Texan low for days with a bullet in the head. There would be one less to run off the herds that night.

Hurriedly Menlo Dory remounted and took the upward trail, still with caution in spite of the lope on the grade. Baca's escape was bad; these two Bar W importees had left the mountains early enough to reach the Wilcox range in furtherance of some design; Baca would make it. The other, Monk Baizee, would have a shorter distance to travel to Wagon Rod to join the rustling bunch, if that was his plan after safely disposing of his captives.

A brief five minutes and the Texan abruptly drew rein. His eyes searched the intermittent earth and rocks of the trail, in vain. The marks of the horses had vanished. He back-trailed, carefully but speedily. There the tracks were! And the imprints broke the dusty ground where a thicket of alders lined the trail. Here up canyon the mounts of Full-House Cox and Baca had come through less than fifteen minutes before. Menlo shoved his horse through the undergrowth between the saplings. Back and up fifty feet the trail took distinct form in the floor of a small ravine. The Texan climbed in a walk, eyes flitting from left to right and ahead. Suddenly he halted, at the rim of a rincon, an open cup on the mountainside, the beginning of what would some day be another canyon. It was lined with pinon and liveoak, and beyond the trees in the cup the rider beheld a roof of brown bark.

Five minutes later he stood beside a rude log and brush shack from which came the sound of voices. "But they're going to use us to draw your dad and mine to 'Dobe Tombs, while they run off the cattle. . . . Can't you see, Bob?" It was the voice of Jean. The door, obscured by an overhanging hackberry tree, was locked on the outside by a spike and chain holding a formidable hasp.

Menlo lifted the spike noiselessly from the staple, removed it from the loose link of the chain and pocketed it. Shoving the heavy door in quickly, he stepped into the room, and closed the door behind him, fearing a shot from the trees that might reach Jean or young Wilcox. He laid a finger to his lips for silence, turned to go out to find Baizee; he heard a metallic click and fired quickly through the puncheon slabs of the door.

A hoarse laugh answered him; Monk Baizee must have had another spike in readiness. In reality the Chink-faced gunman had shoved the barrel of his six-shooter into the big staple, from a safe vantage point at one side.

"Be a good hombre, Mister Dory," jeered the rustler. "You kin be sayin' yore prayers while waitin' for Tevizon!"

He leisurely whittled out an oaken peg and silently, slowly transferred it to the lock where his emergency gun-barrel had been. Menlo heard him riding a moment later.

16

"WHILE waiting for Tevizon," murmured the Texan, as thought to himself, repeating the threat of Monk Baizee.

"Means Tevizon is coming here tonight—on business—and this is the hangout of the bunch when 'Dobe Tombs gets too hot," he added. "Plenty room to stow away a herd in several places on the other side

this ridge, I reckon." He met the calm, courageous eyes of the girl. "I'm a blundering fool," he reproached himself. "Thinking to hold off his fire till I went out and got him. Serves me right, if it wasn't for you—two. But we're not through yet!"

He made a hasty examination of the cabin in which they were trapped, while Jean's quiet words lent encouragement. "You are so resourceful; there must be a way out. It was terrible—the shooting of that cowboy, Berry; it was my fault; I urged him to hold back with me. Oh, you are wounded!" She touched his gray shirt, glued and matted to his back.

"It's a trifle." He stepped to a flimsy pine table. The girl steadied it. "Bob, can't we help, some way?" she demanded.

The youth, who had not spoken since Menlo's entry, reached up an empty whiskey case. Standing on this, the Texan examined the roof.

The rafters were solid, closely placed timbers; the slabs of bark were nailed securely above them, with supporting ridgepoles here and there to make the job effective in rough mountain winters. This cabin had been built by other hands, for service. In the absence of saw or hatchet the roof permitted no escape.

The windows were mere holes in the logs, enough to admit light and a rifle, if need be. Menlo tried the walls; they were adamant, notched logs laid to stay.

"Who shot you? If there were water—" Jean pulled back Menlo's shirt with gentle fingers.

The Texan brushed her aside; he did not answer, for it galled him that Tevizon had left that mark. He tried the door. The light was fading; through the two little openings the twilight crept in from the mountainside. There was no lantern, and little of anything inside the room but the table and two rickety chairs and the empty whiskey case. There was the odor of stale liquor about and a deck of playing cards. The floor was rough boards; digging out would be a long and tedious process. With no candle or lantern, they would have to work quickly. The door failed to yield to the combined pressure of the three of them. Jean's voice began to betray alarm.

"It isn't so much ourselves I am thinking of. It is what will happen at 'Dobe Tombs. It is worse than we guessed. Everything that has taken place for weeks has led up to this night—I know from what I heard those desperate men say before they shot Dick Berry and since; they're taking news to my father that I am being held prisoner at the Tombs by Bob and Bar W—they're using Tomlinson to tell Father that. Originally they planned to take me there, hide me in some secret chamber, and show me to Wagon Rod men to make Dad try rescue. And at the same time they are sending someone to tell Bill Wilcox that Bob is being held there. Because you changed their original plans does not alter what they will say. They want every available man of both

outfits to be at the Tombs, fighting each other, killing each other. Oh, can't you see?"

"While they fill this canyon with stolen cattle," the Texan added grimly. "It looks like we're locked in here for keeps. There's one thing we can do—wait. When they come to get you two, they won't want to take your lives. You're too valuable for what they have in mind. As for me, I'm still supplied with cartridges."

He sat down on the floor, against the wall, leaned back and rested. "Might as well take it easy till somebody comes. Seems our only chance."

Jean moved over beside him. "Isn't there anything I can do about that injury?" she asked anxiously.

Bob Wilcox was pacing the floor, his nerves on edge.

"I've heard enough of this!" he blurted angrily, whirling on Jean. "You'd think it was this fellow you were to marry!"

Menlo Dory got up, walked to the far corner of the room, his face harsh in the fading twilight. The strain under which young Wilcox had labored, combined with his recent drinking, had all but made a wreck of him, and Menlo did not care to be a party to a lovers' quarrel. He heard Jean's spirited rejoinder:

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Bob, considering what Mr. Dory has done."

"I've heard enough of it!" raged the young cowboy. "I'm sick of hearing it! It's all you think about—Mr. Dory this and Mr. Dory that!" His eyes glittered in the faint light. "My God, I'm no fool—I can see you are going for this fellow head over heels!"

"That's a horrid thing to say," gasped the girl, looking half frightened at Bob Wilcox's wrath-contorted face. "It's not very decent of you, Bob, considering all that Mr. Dory has done for both of us—"

"What's he done? Why has he done it?" flung out the Bar W man. "Why all his interest in the Pardmores if he came here to help my dad? I'm not blind!" He took a step toward the Texan, whose back was turned, his tall figure motionless. "We might as well have it out, Dory—you and me. No matter how this thing goes from here on, I want an understanding about Jean. And you've got to come clean. You hear me?"

Menlo turned about slowly, the cigarette in his taut lips. A strange light crept into his steely blue eyes. "I reckon you owe the young lady an apology, Bob. You're not dealing top card with her. She's given you her word, hasn't she—pledged herself to you? Well, pipe down, and think it over."

"You're in love with her," gritted Wilcox. "And she's halfway gone on you—if not more! I'm no fool!" His fists were clenched and his face worked in jealous agony.

The Texan checked the ugly word "lie" that leaped on the tip of

his tongue. He flipped down his cigarette, ground it under his boot. Then he laughed heartily and his eyes twinkled. "You give an old rawhider like me a lot of credit, young feller," he said. "Miss Jean's not crazy. It's beneath her to even answer such an unfair accusation under the circumstances, and I hope she ignores it entirely."

The girl was tight-lipped, both angry and hurt.

"Laughing it off don't prove a thing," scoffed young Wilcox, glaring at the Texan.

"I'll say this, boy," Menlo soothed him. "The only time Miss Jean ever asked a favor of me was when she wanted me to help clear up the row between the two outfits so you two could go ahead with your plans and be married. If ever a girl loved a man she's shown her devotion to you. The trouble is you don't appreciate a good thing when you've got it."

Bob's head drooped a little, but his face was still hard set. "You told her I was drunk," he charged, anger rising anew.

"No!" Jean's eyes blazed. "He did nothing of the kind."

"You've got a low measure on me, that's sure," the Texan said, his voice harsh. "That's the last thing I'd do, especially to the son of my best friend. So far as the drinking goes, I don't reckon you were drunk, and you've had plenty of provocation, anyhow. The way things have been going, it would drive most any man to drink if it was separating him from the girl he was to marry. You two better kiss and make up."

Shaken, Bob Wilcox sat down. "I'm sorry, Jean," he mumbled in a broken voice. "I guess I was wrong."

"Very well, then." The girl's tone was kindly. "I think you owe it to Mr. Dory to ask his pardon. Of course, I love no one but you, Bob. You have so little faith."

Bob rose quickly, walked over to the Texan and took his hand. "I was a fool," he said weakly. "I guess my trouble is I realize I don't measure up to your stature as a man. It makes me think Jean will compare me with you, and that would make me look mighty small."

"Any son of Bill Wilcox is a better man than an old gunhawk like me, Bob. And Jean sure knows it, as she's proved just now—and before." A shadow crossed the Texan's eyes. "Right now we're facing a tight situation, all of us. That's the chief thing we've got to think about." His gaze was on the big metal hinges of the door, strap pattern hardware attached to the hewn longs on the inside. An idea took shape.

Taking the spike he had carried from the outside lock, he looked for some object to use as a hammer to drive the metal peg behind one of the hinges. There was not even a stone or brick that he could use.

He seized a chair, smashed it against the log wall, shattering it. Taking the handiest leg, he struck at the spike to force it behind the top hinge. The wooden piece broke; he tried another and another.

The spike could not be forced behind the heavy strap of metal. It was now almost dark.

"Wish we had a cold chisel or even a screwdriver," from Bob, nervously lighting a cigarette.

"Hinges are nailed. Strike a match, Bob. Hold it high—near the top." Menlo Dory moved closer and lifted out his frontier Colt forty-five. "Get on this side, Miss Jean!"

As the girl moved where the bullet would not deflect, his gun roared. Another lighted match as the smoke cleared revealed the bent edge of the hinge, the outermost nail pried loose. Now he tried the spike, lifted the metal from another nail. The third held, and another shot broke it. The upper end of the heavy door was free.

With a yank, the Texan pulled the barrier down and in.

They were out, in the fading amber light, melting to gray and indigo in the north and east. Menlo's horse, with those of Jean and Bob, was tied in the lean-to at the rear of the cabin, where Baizee had carefully secured them, for future use.

Through the dusk, with no time for talk, they traveled down the ravine from the rincon, rode through the alders and chaparral at the main trail and turned into the wider floor of Cow-Thief Canyon.

Darkness fell on their pathway, silencing the chattering jays in pine and the lower cottonwood; gloom shrouded the canyon walls, leaving them alone save for the distant cry of the cougar, the sound of swiftly hammering hoofbeats, the flip of a nighthawk's wing. The stars blinked at intervals; clouds splotched the sky to southward. They reached the mouth of the canyon; a light glimmered ahead—Carl Sands' place at Chavez. The night wind hinted rain; it was such an evening as would please Tevizon and his squad of rustlers.

Menlo drew into a walk. He watched the darkened acreage beside the railroad track where lay the stock pens and loading chute. If Wagon Rod had acted according to schedule, the herd would be there now, waiting for loading on the siding in the morning at daylight. As they neared, a lantern moved among restless, stirring inky forms; there was the hoarse bawling of yearling cattle.

But for the pledge to Carl Sands to return there—to prevent an alarm to Pardmore that Cox and Baca of Bar W had made off with Jean—the Texan would have shunted off from the canyon and ridden with Bob and Jean direct for the Tombs to halt the threatened clash; it would be better to sacrifice the herd than to bring on senseless bloodshed. Menlo might have remained to watch the men guarding the cattle, sending the other two ahead, but for the risk to Jean. He had lost confidence in Bob's ability to protect the girl he was to marry.

Hence he led his charges wide of the herd in the moonless night and curved around toward the rear of the store at Chavez, first making sure that Carl Sands was in the building alone.

At that moment four booted and spurred figures squatted down on the hay litter under the loading chute at the railroad, a study in yellow and black in a lantern's glow, while Tevizon shuffled his deck.

"And Pardmore calls for he'p, and you send Panther an' Ash," murmured Tomlinson, a grin on his huge mouth. "Tev, there never was yore equal!"

The flat-nosed one flipped out the cards, chuckled. "Who the hell yuh think *would* go? *Us?*?"

"Not any, when we played our hand fer weeks to be in on this pot tonight, as the gardeens of the herd. But that pass of yores, Tev, to get rid of them two we was thinkin' we'd have to hog-tie, was the purtiest thing I ever see. Shows Pardmore is plumb in the Tombs trap with Wilcox, too—the way he hustled Sands over to git us gun hands to he'p him fight!"

"Leave it to Tev, Tommy," hummed Powder LaMotte, his florid face flushing as he eyed his hand. "If we was a little nearer we'd hear shootin' in a hour." He opened with threes.

Tevizon grinned. "Make it snappy; we got to be movin' *poco tiempo*. Joke of it is Pant'er Treek and Jimmy Ash *volunteered* to go, leavin' us babies to watch these coaws!"

"Raise yuh a peg." Monk Baizee laid down a blue one. "Tev is smart. But I ain't told no deetails how I corraled that Tehanno with them two infants. Laugh, dang yuh—when I seen that hombre lifted the spoke, I shoved in my pistol!"

"Yore pistol?" Tevizon taunted. "I'm laughin'. Them three up there snug as a tick in a dogie, waitin'. Monk, you done noble, all except the rotten news yuh brung about Full-House—glad yuh got his gun and dragged him outa sight, anyhow—so nobody'll run onto his carcass if they's a chase! Listen, I got a surprise for yo'-all!" He leaned forward, his deep-set, tiny jet eyes gleaming.

The game paused. "Baca's hustled through, I bet my cattridges, to whisper in Bill Wilcox's ear about Wagon Rod grabbin' Bob and holdin' him at 'Dobe Tombs. Which same makes Bill see red, not countin' that when I beat Wagon Rod out'n them 'dobes, I run into Dick Berry—kilt—and I know Baca knowed who done *that*. Which the breed won't fail to tell Bill, neither, hangin' it onto Pardmore's bunch. So much fer Bar W bein' out to kill—while Baca works with Dutch Gruber and that new bunch for the cut there—it all bein' an extry pice of change fer *us*." He laid down his hand. "Gimme that whiskey!"

"Now! Tommy has already spoke to Lew, 'bout what's happened to his she-child, bein' run off by Bob and the Bar W bunch down to them same said Tombs. Which we know too how Lew's started fer the war front, him callin' us to help! There never was nothing purtier, me discardin' them Quaker boys, Pant'er and Jim Ash. And us ready fer the drive up Cow-Thief. Same time you boys don't know nothin'—

yuh don't know a dam' thing!" His lips twisted into a crooked smile.

He shot out rapid-fire words: "Lend me yore listen-ears! You boys has been jake—stick with yore gun-totin' hero and you kin buy every color chips! It don't make no difference that we fozzled on that first play to git them babies into the Tombs. We're goin' to put 'em there—yet!" He leaned back, rolled a cigarette.

"They couldn't be safern' where they are," grunted Monk Baizee, with a shrug.

"Yeh, they could! Before the night is over, Monkey-boy, there ain't goin' to be a foot of Cow-Thief Canyon that ain't sign-read. That's why you and Tommy and Powder has got to keep them feeders movin' right straight through while I turn back and 'tend to business. That business includin' the preachin' over Tehanno Dory and the pasturin' of the lady and Bobbie Wilcox in the Tombs!"

"What the hell's that for, when we got the herd?" demanded the Chink-faced one.

"How much you figger that herd's worth?" rasped Tevizon.

"Them three hundred is worth six-seven thousand."

"You don't know nothin', countin' what *we* kin get. But if they was worth ten thousand, we could still let 'em slide, lose every head, and make money!"

Powder LaMotte shrugged. "Yo're talkin' in riddles, Tev."

"Showin' you hombres don't know *nothin'*. With them two rich cattle heirs corraled safe and indefinite in 'Dobe Tombs—which the man don't live that kin get them out—we shake down Bill Wilcox and Lew Pardmore both for their roll, sixty thousand pesos, thirty thousand gold. And we get it, every dime, because them two kin stand it to a nickel. Now, are yuh glad yuh come?" He took up his hand, chuckled at the rotten deal he had given himself. "Where yuh goin', Tommy?" He stared at the quietly vanishing puncher, who had dropped his cards and glided around the fence.

"Yuh mean we want ransom?" queried LaMotte, his florid face somewhat pallid. "Even after they know we run off the cattle?"

"Let 'em know—it'll make 'em ante the quicker. Where'n cats did Tommy go?"

"He thought he heered somethin'," from Monk Baizee. "I thought I heered a hoss myself." Baizee rose and peered through the cattle-crowded stock pens.

Tevizon grabbed up the cards, gathered in the chips and blew out the lantern.

"Where?"

"Dunno. Acrost the canyon trail, seemed like. It's blacker'n a Yaqui—shore blowin' up a rain. Yowee!" He spun around. "What'n—"

"Yuh fool!—it's on'y a skunk. Yuh got all them bars in place, so's we kin drop 'em and travel with these cows the minute we corral Senor

Sands? *Bueno*. We better start crowdin' 'em soon's Tommy comes back. He didn't hear no hosses—there ain't nobody comin' out that canyon, because there ain't nobody in it but them three yuh locked in the shack."

They waited, impatiently, but Tomlinson was slow in returning. When he did so, twenty minutes later, it was from the direction of Carl Sands' training post. He climbed the corral fence hastily.

"You there, Tev?" he shot out in an undertone.

"Yeh, you lunkhaid! What's feedin' on yuh—"

"Three riders jist sneaks by, out'n Cow-Thief Canyon, and one of them wears skirts!"

The little gunman's boots clicked; he hit the ground and spur-chains rattled as he trotted toward the corner which held the horses, the others at his heels. When his tongue had tainted the night air with profanity, he managed to ask:

"What way they headin' now? Monkey-boy, you done one handsome job, lockin' 'em in!" he sneered.

Baizee's lame explanation was cut short by Tomlinson. "I trailed them three to behind Carl's store. They're there now!"

They rose to the saddle, by force of habit, though the distance was but a stone's throw, while Tevizon barked hoarse orders. "I'm doin' *all* the shootin', lessen we git that Tehanno alone. We don't want to hurt the *ninos*—we'll recapter them easy. It ain't so bad. Them two is our meat and we'll pot Dory. But even if that bird does git through, Wagon Rod will shore kill him—because Lew thinks that hombre shot the sheriff!"

Spreading out, they rode swiftly across the tracks.

17

THE sky, overcast from horizon to zenith now, with not a star visible, offered welcome cover for Menlo Dory and his two charges as they galloped away from Carl Sands' store on the 'Dobe Tombs trail, unaware of the four riders at that moment crossing the Santa Fe tracks. But though the Texan did not know of their near presence, the darkness was welcome; he had heard a suspicious jingling of spurs near the Sands warehouse but a few minutes before, and Carl had told him of the personnel of the group guarding the herd at the shipping pens. His eagerness to avoid trouble at this stage was prompted by Jean's and Bob's safety—and what he had heard from Sands made it urgent that Lew Pardmore be reached at the Tombs immediately, even at the cost of the herd.

The talkative but faithful trader had related how he had carried Menlo's message of the late afternoon; how he had encountered the

drive herd on the way, in charge of Jim Ash, Panther Treek, Tevizon, Tomlinson and Powder LaMotte. York had planned to run the drive, but the exciting news of the disappearance had put him and Pardmore in the saddle on the hunt. Then when Sands finally found the Wagon Rod owner, it was almost dark. Pardmore had come back from the Tombs, scoured much of the range, and had run into Tomlinson, who told the news of Jean's capture by Bar W men under Bob Wilcox with many embellishments, adding she was being held at the Tombs.

"Lew was gettin' every man he could," asserted Sands, "and sent Herb Langre to Ranger to round up more. I told him Tomlinson was probably lyin', but he wouldn't hear to it, and my mouth was closed 'bout you chasin' them Bar W skunks up the canyon. I give him yore message to be on the lookout for Tevizon and them others, but when I mentioned yore name, he flew into a tantrum, accusin' you of bein' a Bar W spy and shootin' the sheriff that same afternoon."

"He said that, did he?" demanded the Texan angrily.

"I said, 'What's yore proof of that?' He said, 'Proof enough, havin' seen yore tall figger sneakin' up the draw as he arrived and findin' yore empty rifle.'"

"It wasn't my rifle," said Menlo bitterly. "I dragged it out of the way when Tevizon dropped it."

"Shore you did, but Lew didn't know them details, and neither did I. But he razooed me for bein' a Wilcox sympathizer and ordered me off. But he might have took a little stock in what I said, because when I started back for Chevez he told me to send Tevizon and them gunhands to him, to fight Bar W at the Tombs. Mebbe he didn't exactly trust them with the herd, after hearin' my story."

"You send Tevizon and the others back?" queried the Texan quickly.

"I told 'em their orders." Carl Sands lowered his tones. "But they didn't go—they sent Panther and Jim Ash. Tev is right out here now, guardin' the herd!"

Menlo had hesitated, knowing the danger to the Wagon Rod stock; but it was urgent to head off Pardmore at the Tombs. He knew that Baca too had been busy, racing from the canyon to get out the Wilcox bunch, as revealed by Jean from what she had overheard. The Texan had been standing in the gloom back of the warehouse, after getting Sands to come out. At this stage he had heard the suspicious jingle of spurs—the sleuthing Tomlinson, although he did not know the fact. He had asked Sands for extra guns for Jean and Bob, but the merchant could spare but one, which he gave to young Wilcox. "I just got back here half an hour ago; there ain't no tellin'—this bunch might try to pot me before the night is over," asserted the whiskered trader. "I'm for Bill Wilcox every time, but what I've talked is private, Mister Dory—I ain't talked this much in eighteen months."

With the sole purpose of reaching Pardmore or Wilcox with his

young charges, whose very presence would prove his story and prevent bloodshed, the Texan had started swiftly on the 'Dobe Tombs trail, through the blackening night. He did not try to find the skulker whose spur-sounds he had heard, and in the darkness he saw nothing of the desperate four who had crossed to the store in the wake of his departure.

He did not enlighten Jean or Bob of Carl Sands' revelations; there was not time. But the Wagon Rod mistress had overheard enough, with what she already knew, to understand much. She was riding between Menlo, who set the pace, and Bob Wilcox. She called to the Texan.

"Let Bob and me go ahead; we can explain everything! You are a Bar W man, off your range—in the enemy's lines—and I heard what he said about your being blamed for the sheriff's death."

Menlo slowed. He had been thinking along somewhat the same lines—not of the danger to himself, however, but of what he might do to save the herd. Bob Wilcox was armed; he had not shown outstanding courage in defending Jean before, it is true, but the trail to the Tombs would be clear. Sands had named the four with the herd—Tevizon, LaMotte, Tomlinson and Monk Baizee. There were no others on the Wagon Rod side of the 'Dobe Tombs draw. Jean's presence would protect Bob from rough handling by Pardmore's men.

He drew up. "All right. Tell your dad Tevizon is running off his cattle. Tell him I'll be in among 'em, but not to count me a thief if he comes up while the fight's on. Bob, you make it to your dad quick as you can, after sceing Jean through—and tell him to look after his own cows, or there'll be a bigger raid than there was last night. Good-bye!"

"But you'd better wait until you get more help—"

Menlo did not heed her. He back-trailed toward Chavez and the stock pens. A distant report, faint but sinister in its meaning, reached his ears from beyond the precipitous drop in the floor of the mesa behind him. That shot had been fired somewhere in the draw that held the two abandoned adobes. The Texan's brows drew down; Jean and Bob would have to hurry, to save precious lives of honest, fearless men, in open combat through misunderstanding. But the two messengers would do as well alone—or better—than with him.

His mount had been hard-ridden; he dropped into a jog-trot. The thieves would be in no hurry; a fight of this kind might last all night. Sands' place was but a mile back.

A spattering of rain fell, a few great drops presaging a downpour. Menlo was without coat or slicker, but he gave it no thought; he wondered if Jean would be drenched, and wished that she would not have to be out in a night like this. Bob would have no coat or other covering to offer her, to go over her thin blue waist—Bob never seemed to be able to do anything for her when there was need, as a

man should for the girl he was to marry. If Menlo were in Bob's place— He frowned in sudden self-appraisal; he could not do more than Bob, so far as the rain was concerned. The drops multiplied, laying the dust, freshening the sultry night air. The Texan turned his head, listened, drawing to a cautious stop. What was that!

His mount stood unmoving; the lean, tall figure in the saddle bending a trifle forward, ears straining. Only the rustle of the rain, the gusts of tumbleweed-driven wind broke the stillness. Yet the impression of the rider was strong that some object had passed somewhere to the left in the darkness. He remained motionless for a time, senses alert, but there was no other sound. He debated whether to turn back to rejoin Jean and Bob. No, they would be well on their way by now; none of the rustlers would be riding toward 'Dobe Tombs at this stage. The sound had probably been a figment of the imagination.

He went on; yet his misgiving mounted as he neared the light of the Chavez trading post, riding more briskly through the fast-increasing gusts of wind and rain. His gray flannel clung to him like a wet rag, smarting where it caked to the clot in his wounded shoulder blade. Reaching the rear of the store, he swung down, glided to the entrance. Carl Sands was striding back and forth on the rattling board floor, lips jerking out little whiffs of smoke from a short-stem pipe almost buried in his whiskers.

"Dory!" The merchant dropped his pipe, lifted it with nervous fingers. "They didn't get you—I'm plumb glad! I lied to 'em, but it wasn't no use—one of 'em spotted you here." His jaw fell. "Did they get Miss Jean—or that galoot?"

"Who, and where are they, Carl?"

"Gad, didn't you see 'em? The whole bunch—the whole four—went by here right on yore trail, leavin' the herd plumb without a hand—"

Menlo did not wait for more; he made for the saddle while Sands called to him to change horses, have a bite to eat, and take his slicker. "They'll kill me for this," affirmed the trader, as Menlo wheeled his mount and rode. There was no time even to change horses, which the Texan would have done if there had been a moment's grace. He knew that Jean and Bob were but a matter of minutes ahead of Tevizon and his three rustler associates.

Only extreme urgency would have induced Tevizon to leave the cattle when he had them as good as delivered—that or the promise of greater reward. Why had not the renegade band attacked him, in the rear, under mask of darkness? Only one explanation seemed reasonable: they had come within earshot at the moment of their parting; they had counted on taking the best game first. Knowing where Menlo was going, they could bide their time a little while.

But now that they had worked their decoy game and got the herd into their hands, why were they so anxious to take Jean and Bob again? But one answer seemed possible. Finding the first kidnapping so easy, they had struck upon the plan of extorting big stakes from their erstwhile victims for the two cattle heirs—thus the Texan reasoned.

He was on the 'Dobe Tombs trail, a quarter of a mile east of the Wagon Rod route, knowing that outlaws must have followed this route. If they were successful in overtaking their quarry, Menlo might run into them on the return. Though he could not see the beaten path through the sand and alkali soil of the mesa, he knew his broncho was following it faithfully. His eyes strained at the darkness ahead; he did not slacken pace.

Reaching after many minutes a stretch of pebbly gravel, as told by the sound of his horse's footsteps, his heart beat high with hope, for he was near the great drop from the mesa and had not yet encountered riders on the return. Had they retaken Jean and Bob Wilcox, they would have back-trailed while the draw ahead was full of the combatant cowpunchers. Menlo slowed a little.

In a moment he stiffened, had his six-shooter in hand—someone had pulled back the hammer of a pistol. Halting, the Texan scanned the blackness in the direction of the sound; his eyes told him something was moving away, like a scarcely discernible black ghost.

"Stop!" Menlo spurred toward the indefinite shape; he passed it before he was aware.

"Dory!"

"Bob! Where's Jean?" The Texan glided from the saddle, for he had seen the other was afoot.

"They got her! I thought you were them—till I heard your voice."

"Got her?" snapped the Texan. "How, when?"

"They caught us both. I had that gun of Sands on my hip; they didn't know it, and I fought them after we started and got clear, but they managed somehow to sneak away with Jean. They had just divided, and Tevizon was taking us away from the rest—"

"Which way did that snake go?" demanded Menlo with bitter irony.

"Towards the Tombs, and those other three cut off west to the Wagon Rod—Chavez trail—or two of 'em did, and the other went with them part way, to round the draw and get help from Gruber. I heard Tevizon tell LaMotte to do that. He said: 'Tell Gruber to let the Bar W cows go and beat it to the canyon with his waddies for a piece of real money!'"

"Where's your horse?"

"Back there—" gesturing through the rain and gloom. "I left him

when I heard you, thinking you might see such a big object—thinking you were that bunch come back—”

“Get on him and ride hell-for-leather for Bar W and tell your dad what you’ve been through.” Menlo Dory dashed off in the driving rain.

18

THE Van Horn ex-ranger let his mount have its way down the precipitous slopes of the palisades into Hidden Valley toward 'Dobe Tombs draw. It was the same trail at this point that he and Jean Pardmore had traveled on that day, more than two weeks ago, when she had halted to caution him that he would be shot if he insisted on coming to Hidden Valley. He had been shot, more than once, but not killed; and he wondered if Jean, again in the hands of the renegades, would ever have reason to be glad that he had stayed.

There was no shooting in the draw now, a fact that gave him heart. In the enforced slow going on the slippery, rain-washed trail, he was seized with momentary dejection over his failure, to date. Skag Garone, the one now known as Tevizon, was no mean foe. Added to the suspicions and misunderstandings among the cattlemen, the frustration of his every act embittered, hardened Menlo. He knew that he had been branded a spy, was now accused of the murder of the sheriff, and Wagon Rod men, on whose range he was traveling, would deem it good work to shoot him. The thought stiffened his determination, brought the lean, hook jaw forward in the night's blackness.

He reached the floor of the valley and spurred to a gallop on the slope that led to the draw. If he got through the lines and Lew Pardmore would listen to him, the battle of the Tombs would end and all hands would scour the range for Tevizon and his captive; they might even save the Chavez herd. It was significant that the flat-nosed gunman had sent to Gruber for help in running off the herd. Perhaps Tevizon had other plans, pertaining to Jean—extorting ransom money, for instance. And if the border killer could lay the theft of the herd on Gruber and his Bar W associates, it would be a master stroke.

Through the blackness the trail curved nearer the abandoned adobes of the draw. From the far slope burst a stab of light through the rain; a wind-driven report sounded very near at hand. There was reply—two shots—from the Wagon Rod side. The fight was not yet over. But for the darkness that made targets invisible save when there was gunfire the losses would have been heavy ere now—perhaps men had already been slain. Menlo yanked up suddenly as a phantom shape streaked in front of him. He drew his gun, though he had no hope

of Tevizon being this close to the draw. A cone of white light hit his eyes, snapped off quickly—a flashlight.

"Put 'em up, Dory!" Then, in louder tones, calling back: "We've got him, Lew!" Menlo recognized the voice of Herb Langre, tall, dark-eyed Adonis of the Wagon Rod.

Silence. This spot was several hundred yards from the adobes; what were these men doing so far back? It was too dark to see outlines, but Menlo's intent eyes deciphered two figures afoot. Not far away he thought he saw larger forms moving restlessly in the rain—horses. He heard a whinny; here the saddle mounts were herded while their riders were skulking about near the Tombs in the storm. "We want you, Dory!"

Menlo remained motionless; he gave easy answer.

"I want to see Pardmore, pronto."

"You'll see him!" One of the figures, Langre's companion, glided around toward the rider's rear. Menlo heard his surly, meaningful words. "Climb down, hombre, and no El Montero play goes, because the draw don't do yuh no good in the dark and we're done drawed on yuh already!" It was the voice of the slain Langley's deputy, Clem Chafee. "Yo're under arrest!"

"Under arrest." Herb Langre took up the words, continued to explain: "We'd kill you sudden, hombre—there's men backing you up the hill now, too—we'd kill you like a snake if it weren't we're giving you the chance to lead us to Miss Jean. Talk now, Texas, and climb down, pronto, or we'll fill yore carcass full of lead and take the chance at finding the girl. *Get down!*"

"Not so fast there, boys!" Menlo wheeled his mount in the darkness, brought it back and around from between them. "If you're interested in Miss Jean, Tevizon's got her somewhere between here and Chavez, and the rest of his gun-crew are making ready to run off the cattle at the shipping pens. Get that word to Pardmore, quick as you can—"

"It's a lie! I saw Tevizon a minute ago. Step down! If you're on that horse a second longer, we'll cut down on you sure and get you between us, even if you do beat one of us, you damned woman-stealing skunk!"

"Cut it!" The Texan's words whip-lashed angrily. "I'm riding, to find Pardmore! Don't want to hurt you, Langre, or your friend—you don't know any better—but I'll give you hot lead before I let you call me on getting help to Jean." He cocked his gun so they might hear.

"They'll lynch yuh shore's yo're a killer!" from the deputy, now acting sheriff. "We was offerin' the protection of the law—"

Menlo drove his bronco at him, and clear of Langre. He was checked in an unexpected manner by a large horse and massive rider appearing out of the darkness directly ahead.

"Dory—my gun is on you—and I heard all you said!" It was Lew Pardmore's voice. "You cain't expect me not to kill you like a viper, but by thunder I'm holding myself in check till I hear you tell what you done with her!"

"Lew, you're blaming me wrong." Menlo's tones were even. "Time's mighty precious, or I wouldn't argue the question with any man. I'm talking for Miss Jean now; she's in Tevizon's hands up there on the mesa somewhere—I'd stopped to hunt her, but it would be like cutting out a dogie in that storm at midnight—you've got to send your whole bunch—"

"Send 'em away from Bar W's skulkin' coyotes at the Tombs, so you could get her over the line!" shot out Pardmore bitterly, heatedly. "You contemptible renegade—say you wasn't ridin' with her less'n an hour ago! Say it and I'll ventilate you!"

"I was—bringing her back from the canyon where Tevizon's bunch had her—till that snake got her again—"

"Stop it! I talked to Tevizon less'n fifteen minutes ago right here. *He seen you.* He come here to tell me. But he didn't need to! I savvy yore game, you danged spy, workin' with that whippersnapper reprobate Bob Wilcox and them Bar W lobos—"

"Ain't any use to argue," snapped the Texan, his anger rising. "Tevizon's playing you, and his men will be running off your herd before the nights' over. I'll advise you to draw your men back to the mesa and hunt for Jean, and at the same time watch Tomlinson, LaMotte and Baizee at the shipping pens. They've laid a trap to clean you, Pardmore!"

"Kind, fatherly advice from a sneakin' spy! The one that murdered the sheriff—"

"That's a lie—"

"I seen you, and yo're held for that crime—I've got my gun on you this minute. Clem, you and Herb take him—I'll pot him if he makes a move."

The deputy's flashlight was on the Texan. Pardmore's great hulk drew menacingly near. "We ought to shoot you, but we'll give you the law, if the lynchers don't get you while waitin' till you talk, about where you took Jean—you and that rat Bob you was with."

Menlo had not mentioned the presence of Bob with Jean, fearing that would make Pardmore more convinced than ever of his collusion in the kidnapping. "Bob got through," he said now. "If you can reach him, or talk to Bill Wilcox, you'll find out that both Bob and your daughter were taken by Tevizon's gang."

"Bob got through, eh? You admit Bob was with you when you had my girl! Clem, you and Langre lead him off to Ranger. It'll give him a chance to confess, on the way, and otherwise I reckon he'll be

spirited out of that jail and hanged before the night's over." Pardmore's big forty-five was on the Texan, within eighteen inches.

Menlo might have fought his way clear from the three of them. But he did not want to shoot Jean's father, or the other well meaning pair, for that matter. He let Pardmore lift out his gun, to prevent bloodshed. Shooting Pardmore would not convince him; allowing himself to be slain would not help him to aid Jean. Bitter as was the thought of being disarmed and a prisoner when the help was so sorely needed, there was no other choice at the moment. Langre and the deputy mounted, commanded him to go on.

"For Miss Jean's sake, I hope you'll scour the mesa, Pardmore," said the Texan grimly, as he turned. "If you'll ride north, you'll see your cattle going mighty soon, too!"

He did not mention Gruber—another Bar W complication that would have inflamed Pardmore, who shot back quickly:

"I've got men I can trust guarding that herd—men that'll stand against the word of any spy!" The cowman wheeled and vanished in the darkness.

Herb Langre's saddle fender scraped that of Menlo as they jogged through the rain on the trail to Ranger. The deputy Clem was on the other side, slightly behind. When Menlo asked a question or two about the fighting Langre was sullen and uncommunicative. Recalling how the handsome puncher had sought Jean's favor, in the face of her engagement to Bob, the Texan remembered that Langre had even accused him of interfering in his romantic plans. The acting sheriff was more civil; he seemed to take pride in the fact that he had caught such an important prisoner—one who had been a Texas ranger—a gun-fighting officer of the old regime on the border who had been called El Montero. It was too bad a former ranger had gone wrong, affirmed Clem.

"Anybody shot in that battle down there?" Menlo demanded.

"Yep, one of Wagon Rod's men was shot in the laig," said the officer. "And unless I'm plumb wrong a couple of Wilcox hands is worse off—maybe daid."

The Texan's face darkened. He realized, if Pardmore continued the desultory exchanges at the Tombs, many would be shot before the night was through—unless Bob Wilcox's arrival would change his father's purposes and send the Bar W combatants away. He made comment to that effect.

"Bob Wilcox is our prisoner," remarked Langre caustically. "Tevizon took him."

Menlo stared. Again the flat-nosed outlaw had scored—taking Bob as soon after the Texan had sent him to run the lines to get news to his father of what had happened. Bill Wilcox's men would not leave

the adobes on account of any information Bob might bring! There would be prolonged, indefinite battle.

And Jean? Menlo thought of her situation at that moment, in the growing chill of the rainy night, without sufficient apparel to protect her from damp and cold, at the mercy of Tevizon. He wondered with a gnawing agony where the outlaw would take her and whether Bob, too, would be secreted in the same place. "Did Tevizon leave Bob with Pardmore?" he asked the officer.

"Nope. He took him along, to force him to show where he hid Jean."

Menlo Dory's lips drew taut. Tevizon now had them both again. He had probably left Jean a prisoner on the mesa, tied and helpless in the rain—while he had gone to talk to Pardmore to plant an alibi and delay until Gruber could cross to the canyon. Visions of Jean suffering the perils of pneumonia or worse tortured the Van Horn man.

To go to jail a prisoner, in a cell and disarmed, would leave him helpless to prevent loss of lives at the Tombs; it would leave Jean at the mercy of the renegades. Lew Pardmore's men must be met on the trail, at all costs. Menlo spoke to the acting sheriff with gruff abruptness:

"Take me back to Pardmore. I want to confess. I'll tell him where I put the girl."

19

WITH his two guards on either side of him, the Texan was escorted back toward 'Dobe Draw, along the route they had come. The rain increased in fury; Menlo sat hunched in the saddle, the water dripping from his rag-wet shirt, irritating the wound in his back; it ran in a miniature waterfall from the rain-spout brim of his sombrero, softened his leather cuffs, soaked his trousers and formed a tiny puddle in the empty holster. But of these things he was unmindful. Now that he had decided to confess to a crime he had not committed, he wanted to get it over with as soon as possible, his sole object to take Jean Pardmore from the hands of Tevizon by leading the men who mistrusted him out where she had last been seen. In doing this he would also be terminating the fight at the Tombs.

They rode through splattering mud and occasional pools and swiftly running hour-old streams that swelled the erstwhile dry watercourses; but Langre and the acting sheriff were not going fast enough, and when Menlo tried to hurry they halted him, fearing he might escape in the darkness.

"Glad yuh confessed to takin' the girl," grunted Clem. "Gettin' this night's work done, and out of this storm into dry clothes, will be real pleasant."

"Quite a feather in your cap, too," returned the Texan dryly.

"Shore will be, startin' in on this sheriff job, takin' El Montero, the Texas law-hawk turned bad."

"Better hustle, then, or she'll be drowned out there in the arroyo where I left her."

"You don't come no foxy hurry stuff! We're ridin' plumb deliberate, right ag'in yuh, hombre, where we know—" His horse plunged, reared, as a burst of light and a gun report came from the east of them in the upper draw.

Menlo had drawn up short, and Langre's six-shooter was belching toward the spot whence the flash had come. The officer was now twenty or thirty feet away, and Langre was well behind the prisoner. In the darkness it would have been easy for Menlo to spurt up the slope, and no gun could find him.

But the Texan did not ride. He had no weapon, and, besides, an escape now would not put Pardmore's men on the trail of the outlaws. He heard Clem mutter oaths and waited for him to come back.

Langre had stopped firing; he called to the officer: "You watch this hombre, Clem; I'll get that Bar W skunk yet!"

"Let him go!" snapped the Texan, impatient at the loss of time, every minute of which was precious.

"Shore—let Bar W go!" snarled Langre, with bitter scorn. His horse sloshed off through the mud.

Menlo's arguments to Clem to go on toward the Tombs were vain. "Like as not it's somebody tryin' to rescue you—Bar W sidekicks of your'n!" grunted the officer. "If there's any more shootin' you'll get yours first."

He had come up on the side away from the direction of the shots and gentled his mount to stand behind the Texan. The bullet that had frightened the animal had done no visible injury, or rather none that Clem could feel with his hands by an examination in the dark. After many minutes—Menlo judged fifteen or twenty—Herb Langre's low voice was heard: "You there, Clem?"

"Over here."

Relieved that the delay was not longer, the Texan fell in between them again, and they followed down the draw, the sound of running water marking the old 'Dobe Tombs-Ranger trail. Another fifteen minutes brought them among the dark forms of the saddle herd. Pardmore was not near and there was further delay.

"Lew's down with the other boys, wreckin' them 'dobes," declared the puncher standing horse-guard.

"Wreckin' the 'dobes?" grunted Langre. "What's that for?"

"Ain't goin' to be a wall standin' when this night's over. We've drove Bar W hands back, but we expect 'em to come on again, stronger'n ever. Then they'll be—"

"Watch Dory, Sheriff. I'll bring Lew." The Wagon Rod Adonis plopped through the rain.

When he came back he had the ranch owner and Pete York with him. Menlo did not wait for questioning, but stated his case briefly and quickly.

"Mr. Pardmore, I took your daughter." He did not say from whom. "Bob Wilcox didn't have a thing to do with it. She's being guarded now by a bunch of gunfighters between here and Chavez. I'll take you there, but you're going to need every hand to fight those hombres—especially in the dark. And you've got to hustle, or Gruber and his amigos will be gone. I'll lead you to them!"

Deliberately he had named Gruber instead of Tevizon, realizing that in Pardmore's state of mind repetition of the charge that Tevizon was guilty would have roused the cowman's obstinacy. And mentioning Gruber, a Bar W importee, would give semblance to the whole carefully worded story; it would fire Pardmore with the zest of pursuit and the thirst of renewed battle. The Wagon Rod owner addressed rapid words to Pete York, and the two rode back through the mud of the draw.

From the vague sounds that emanated from the direction of the adobes, the dull thud of falling mud bricks and the subdued shouts of warning and command, Menlo knew that the wrecking of the houses was in full swing. These noises ceased within a few minutes; there was the sound of horses' hoofs. Pardmore and York returned, and others followed on foot, hurrying to the horse herd and mounting. Menlo wished at that moment he had been able to get word to Bill Wilcox of what was going on, but he knew this was impossible. It was enough, for the time being, that the Wagon Rod was being drawn from the Tombs.

"Now ride, Dory," snapped the voice of Pardmore, "and no monkey business, or we'll pot you pronto. Herb, you and Clem crowd him on that side; me and Pete will flank him here."

The Texan rode, at a brisk walk until the slope of the draw had been climbed, then led the cavalcade at a jog, in a direct line for Chavez and the shipping pens. The foot of the big cliffs that fronted the mesa was reached; they climbed now more cautiously, for the trail had been washed out in many places and their mounts more than once slid or lost their footing entirely. But at last they reached the top, on the level mesa, and Menlo halted.

"They've got her somewhere between the Wagon Rod and 'Dobe Tombs trail—I don't know exactly where, because I wasn't to meet 'em till later, right south of Carl Sands' place. The best way to find her is to scatter and comb the mesa straight ahead.

"What makes you confess, Dory?" There was slight suspicion in Pardmore's tone. "Leadin' us to her now?"

"You said you'd see that I got a fair legal trial, didn't you?"

"Ye-ah! You don't deserve any better'n a rope; but you get back my girl, and that promise stands. Boys, you-all scatter out; if you see anythin' suspicious, shoot in the air so's you don't hit Jean in this dark, and we'll see the signal. Pete, you and Herb go, too; me and Clem will travel with this hombre!" Lew Pardmore's teeth chattered, for the cold and rain were getting the better of him, coatless and slickerless like the rest.

Menlo felt keenly for him; he would have liked to disillusion him and appeal to his reason again, but memory of the failure before restrained him. They rode again.

The Texan's plan was threefold: to chance the recapture of Jean on the mesa, where Tevizon might yet be encountered and the whole matter solved; to lead the Wagon Rod riders to Chavez in time to save the herd, incidentally searching for Jean, and to do some work on his own account. But the time was not yet ripe for the latter. After they had ridden all of three miles, with no signal-shot to indicate that clue had been found, Lew Pardmore drew rein. His voice held a fighting note:

"According' to Langre, you left her in an arroyo. How'd you account for that, with them Bar W renegades holdin' her?"

"They'd likely stick under cover till I met 'em, wouldn't they? That arroyo's mighty near. Sheriff, lend me your flashlight?" Menlo reached for it, and found it in his hand. He played it on the level mesa. "I don't know this country as well as I might."

"Don't do it! That light's dangerous, if that bunch sees us!" flared Pardmore.

"They'll think it's me." Menlo grinned—an expression that Pardmore could not see in the darkness. His face sobered; they were making no headway in finding Tevizon and his captives. Sands' place lay near at hand; the store was in darkness at this late hour. Menlo wondered if anything had happened to the whiskered trader. No time was to be lost if the herd was to be saved; LaMotte must have arrived long since with Gruber and his confederates of the Bar W to join in the rustling. There was the chance that Tevizon and the two prisoners were with them. Menlo spoke:

"I reckon if we don't find 'em right ahead, the best thing is to go on and ask those waddies at the herd if they've seen any trace of them."

"Yo're 'a lyin' coyote!" thundered the cowman, "bringin' us here on a stall! Take us to 'em, or I'll fill you full of lead on the spot!"

"I wouldn't do that, if I was you, Mr. Pardmore," drawled the Van Horn man easily. He had used the flashlight for some other purpose than studying the terrain—had noted just where Clem Chafee's holster lay against his hip.

The acting sheriff was at the Texan's left, and in the pitch dark he

did not see the hand that reached out suddenly and silently and lifted his gun clear.

"No, I wouldn't do that," repeated the former ranger, and snapped on the flashlight again. It revealed the leveled gun in his right hand, the white rays bent down on it; then it leaped to the ranch owner.

"Listen, Mr. Pardmore! Call in your men; get 'em ready for a real fight; then ride over to your herd at the railroad. Gruber and some of your own men are about ready to drive 'em off this minute. And they'll tell you where you can find Jean."

He drew back in the soft, silent sand, leaned low on the off side of his mount and turned quickly, as Lew Pardmore's gun flashed. Menlo fairly felt the rush of the bullet above the saddle where a moment before he had been. Now he was beyond anything but a miracle shot, and the cowman did not fire again.

At a safe distance behind the pair, the Texan bent his course to the leftward; he knew that the shot of Pardmore would bring in the others, as the signal agreed upon. He waited a matter of minutes, and spurred forward at a gallop toward Carl Sands' trading post.

There was the chance that Pardmore's men would be close behind, he knew, but he was determined to reach the store or the cattle pens, particularly to learn from Carl Sands what he had seen or heard. If Pardmore should overtake him there, Sands would clear up the situation better than the Texan's words had done.

Reaching the rear of the warehouse, Menlo flung down, tapped cautiously on the door. There was no answer. He went to the front; all was deserted there; his knock was ignored. Fears smote him that Sands had met the fate he had predicted. Going to the rear, he tried the door, found it locked.

There was no trace of the Wagon Rod men. The reason for their delayed approach drove in on Menlo; Pardmore would think the Texas "spy" had an ulterior motive in directing the riders to go to Chavez—the cowman would miscount the whole of Menlo's advice!

Within another minute the Texan was through the low window of the warehouse, after shattering the pane. Stepping forward, he heard a moan. He reached for matches; all were rain-soaked. "Coming, Carl!" he cried out cheerfully. "Where are you?"

The moan was repeated; Menlo glided toward the sound, and found a sugar barrel lying on its side. The barrel moved, and the rescuer reached down to feel a pair of boots, roped together and about the vessel. With his pocket knife he severed the rope and pulled out the imprisoned man. In a moment he had the gag from Sands' bearded lips and tongue. For once the trader had been left close-mouthed! Then Menlo remembered the flashlight, after all his trouble; he was not used to the electric tube in his hip pocket.

"Talk, Carl—fast as you can!" shot out the Texan, snapping on the flashlight. "Where's Tevizon?"

Sands could talk. "He didn't come here! But they're gone, Menlo—they're gone. The whole bunch with the herd, 'ceptin' Tevizon. Me, I slipped out and follered 'em acrost the track fence when Monk Baizee and Tomlinson come back from that chase. That's when I heered Bar W was sendin' men—Gruber and some more. A while ago they come, and there ain't a hoof left! Listen! Hear that? Shootin'—up the canyon! Who could be doin' that? But before they left they ketched me and tied me up, so's I couldn't give no alarm—woulda killed me if they'd knowed I heered their talk—"

"Tevizon got the girl again, Carl! Was he here? *Did he take her and Bob up the canyon again?*"

"No!—accordin' to what I heered 'em say, Tev has circled back to 'Dobe Tombs alone with the prisoners."

Menlo darted for the door. "You're safe, Carl. Pardmore's bunch will be here pronto. Tell 'em every word you know, *except where Tevizon went*. Let 'em chase after the cattle—there's a chance Tevizon will travel back there. If he's at the Tombs, I don't want a mob there again!"

The door was locked, the key missing, and the Texan went through the window, mounted swiftly and rode south, slightly to eastward, to avoid the Wagon Rod riders.

20

WHILE Menlo Dory pressed his tired horse toward 'Dobe Tombs through the unabated rain, he unknowingly crossed the trail of another rider, one whom he believed to be in or near the ruins of the two adobe houses. Tevizon at this juncture was riding alone, after having disposed of his prisoners. As the flat-nosed gunman neared the empty cattle pens, the sound of distant firing up Cow-Thief Canyon in his ears, a crooked smile curved his thin, split lips. He swerved toward Carl Sands' warehouse, at sight of a husky figure silhouetted against the lighted window, peering within.

"Powder!" Tevizon swung down in the darkness, glided toward him. "You done fine, that shootin' and all. I've got them two baits tucked away snug and safe—but what in blazes yuh doin' here watchin' Sands!"

"Cripes, Tev!" shot out LaMotte, in a hoarse whisper. "Somebody's jist been here, and it wasn't Wagon Rod. It musta been Dory! I had that hombre tied, and the lights out—somebody cut him loose! Gimme a drink, fer the love—"

"Tied!" The little man ripped out an oath. "Whad yuh tie him fer?"

"Yuh didn't want him to sound no alarm—ride back and tell Pardmore before we got clear with the herd—did yuh?"

"You orn'ry, locoed jackass! Why didn't yuh make the play like I sent instructions with Gruber, and Carl would think it was Bar W, my men tryin' to save the herd? Now that hombre knows too much, and Lew and his bunch comin' this way. That skunk Dory pulled some kind of a blazer down there at the draw—but we ain't got no time fer palaver. You done excellent, all but this." Drawing his six-shooter, he moved toward the lighted window.

"I've got the key." Powder LaMotte opened the door, and his chief stepped in, gun shoved on the trader. "See how quick you can saddle a hoss, hombre!" He drove Carl Sands out into the night, denying him time to bring a lantern. At the horse shed the alarmed merchant, speeded up by the persuasive outlaw, got an animal ready in jig time.

"Now climb up," commanded Tevizon. "Lend me yore piggin' string." He tied Sands' legs, bound his wrists behind. "Lead him over to the chute, Powder! I'll see yuh in a minute." The little gunman went back to his horse, mounted, and stood for a time listening. Suddenly he wheeled and trotted across the track and into the stock pens where LaMotte had dropped the gate poles. "Line out!" he called to his confederate, and the three started up the canyon, while Sands protested volubly, bewailing the fact that they had not even waited while he got a slicker.

"Yuh won't need it, where yo're goin'," grunted Tevizon.

Where the first liveoaks rose like black ghosts in the darkness, the leader drew up. Slipping his rope under a foreleg of Sands' mount, he called LaMotte out of earshot, drawing the rope taut to hold his prisoner as firing sounded above them.

"Now you got to act—fast. Lew's at the store by now. Purty work, that shootin'! Powder, yore trick is to take this hombre up to the shack and lock him in. I reckon Tommy and Monk is in the main canyon, like they was told, judgin' from that firin'. Send 'em back—I'll be waitin' right here! Then, soon's you git shut of this bird Sands, come a-ridin'. Yore story is the same as ours—you trailed the bunch till you seen they was gone, then come to git help. This rain's a beaut—if it keeps up they won't be a track left where them cattle turned off, and it'll be too dark for 'em to read brush sign. Swear you reckonized Dutch Gruber's voice when the rustlers hit here—all Bar W waddies, sabe?" He extended his bottle.

"But Dutch'll—"

"He's willin'. He's even takin' the blame fer the ransom play—fer his share of the cut! Lay it on him—strong! Ride now, with this galoot, and don't forgit to send Tommy and Monk, pronto. They're

right ahead, less'n half a mile. And tell 'em to pouch their smoke-waggins—they've wasted enough cattridges. Sashay!"

As Powder LaMotte and his prisoner sloshed through the mud, Tevizon turned his mount and rode leisurely down the canyon, ears straining for sounds of pursuit. He forded running freshets where they crossed the trail, climbed the slope where the swollen Cow-Thief creek surged from wall to wall in a narrow defile, and reached the mouth of the canyon. With hat pulled down over his rain-soak, bleary-eyed countenance, he proceeded toward the shipping pens. All was still; but he did not doubt that Pardmore's men had arrived and were planning action. He turned again and rode more briskly the quarter of a mile up the canyon to the liveoaks.

Soon the sound of sloppy, splattering hoofbeats reached him through the rain; he blocked the narrow trail. "Tommy? Monk?"

"Rarin' to go, Tev!"

"You had one hell of a fight with them Bar W coyotes under Gruber! So'd I! Monk, kin you pick the spot where you seen Full-House layin' and where you dragged him into the brush?"

"I reckon—if I had a lantern—why?"

"Wait and see. You let me do the talkin', till I ast yuh any questions!" Tevizon led the trio down the canyon, again to the top gate of the shipping pens, still wide open. From the lower end came hoarse calls of command and the rush of galloping hoofs. "Now, holler!"

Tevizon led with the cowboy cry, spurting down through the big corral toward the approaching riders. Suddenly he halted. "Who's comin'! We're Wagon Rod."

"Tevizon!" boomed the voice of Pardmore.

"Lew! We got one of 'em—mebbe two!" The outlaw whipped his dripping hat, panted as though through great exertion. "We fought 'em all the way—plumb through Cow-Thief! We was outnumbered by them Bar W coyotes—looks like pore Powder LaMotte was laid out cold. But we'd stuck, Lew, if it wasn't we figgered we'd better streak back and git more help. Gruber's takin' them clean into Verdes County!"

"Where's Jean? Where's Jean?" demanded the cowman excitedly.

"Gruber got shut of her, somehow. Leastwise, she wasn't along, because we played Tommy's flashlight on 'em and seen only the six-odd. From what Carl Sands said, that new Wilcox gun-toter Dory swapped Miss Jean from him before his six amigos run the herd—"

"Sands?" shot out the cowman. "Where is he—he's gone!"

"They cleaned him—likely shot him in the brush—leastwise when we tried to send Carl for help he wasn't nowhere around. I'd advise yuh to start, pronto, Mister Pardmore, if yuh want to take that bunch. They're fightin' badgers, the way they swapped lead with us-all. But

Full-House Cox won't ever do any more killin' or stealin'. He's one Wilcox Bar W snake that's—"

"You finished Cox? Good!"

"His body's up there in the canyon now—waitin' fer the coyotes. I'll show yuh where I potted him. We better be moseyin'—"

"No!" Pardmore's voice was tense, tragic. "I won't trail a hoof, long as Jean is at the mercy of that blackguard Bob Wilcox and them Bar W gunmen. I'll lose the herd first!" He called to Clem Chafee, acting sheriff, Pete York and Herb Langre and held a brief parley. "Tev, we'll get the cattle back later, if we find the men that done the kidnappin'. You done fine battlin' these skunks, but yore gun is needed now, worse'n ever, to find that hombre Dory and his Bar W bunch—"

"But I'd like to chase them danged rustlers, as a matter of plain principle."

"You come with us. What way would you go to find Jean, if you was doin' it, Tev?"

"I'd hit back fer the mesa—and maybe right in Ranger."

"You think Bob's took her there—to get married?" wailed Pardmore anxiously and with ill-concealed wrath. "I cain't figure it, Bob actin' thataway, with the help of spies and rustlers. I cain't exactly believe he'd try to force Jean into marryin' ag'in her will—"

"*It ain't that, Mister Pardmore.* I'd guess them babies was goin' to hold out fer a reward."

"Reward?" repeated the cowman dully; then as the import of the word sank home his voice rose to a high pitch of rage. "If that's it—! By God, Tev, yo're right—the way Menlo Dory acted. We caught him, Tev, and he confessed, and give us the slip, with Gruber holdin' the pris'n'r till he came."

"That hombre Dory confessed to what?" queried Tevizon blandly, hiding the emotions that lit his rain- and mud-grimed face.

"Confessed he took her; he drewed us up here, and said these cattle was bein' run off—blamed you and the boys, too, but we didn't come right off, suspectin' him. That devil was takin' the chance of losin' the herd, even, to make shore of Jean. It's blackmail, pure and simple, and that explains it all!" His voice quavered with the words.

"I savvy," said Tevizon sympathetically. And he did "savvy," more than he indicated, for here was a trick of fate again playing into his hands better than he had dared to hope. "I know yore daughter is more to you than any herd of cattle, Lew, and my gun's at yore service, with Tommy's and Baizee's—and mayhap Powder LaMotte, if the boy gits through. We lost Powder up the canyon and was afeered Gruber's bunch got him. You tell us where to strike out, and we ride, day and night, rain or no rain, to find yore girl—if we have to kill Dory and Gruber and Bob Wilcox and Bill hisself!"

Pardmore held another hasty conference with his chosen few, then turned to the little gunfighter. "Tev, you and Tomlinson and Baizee comb the mesa, then meet us in Ranger. Me and Pete and our bunch will ride to Ranger, and get ready to go clean through to Bar W if they ain't in town. Langre and Panther and Jim Ash will take the canyon, on the chance they got her up there."

"*Bucno!*" assented Tevizon admiringly. "You boys that takes the canyon, keep goin' to the top, where we lost 'em; but I reckon you won't find no trace of Jean in Cow-Thief from what Carl Sands said. We're ridin' now!"

All was said that need to be said, and the three parties separated. After Tevizon had passed the trading post, he could not refrain from drawing up in the darkness and exchanging hilarious felicitations with Monk Baizee and Tomlinson. "It's a danged dirty shame to take his money," he chuckled, bringing his fist down on Baizee's back. "Now we set purty, in the gravy, while them two cattle kings rustles the *dinero!*"

Tomlinson joined in the merriment, but Monk Baizee did not. "There's a ketch in this thing that I don't like," affirmed the Mongolian-faced gunman.

"What more could yuh ast?" growled Tevizon. "We fixed a alibi fer ourselves, so's we kin stick around in the open till the money is paid—to Gruber." He laughed easily. "We got a clear hand to pot that hombre Dory on sight—"

"Dory!" croaked Monk Baizee. "That's the ketch I mean!"

"What's the ketch in that damned Tehanno? . . . The . . .!"

Baizee leaned far over in the rain-drenching gloom. "Tev, recollect you stated once before as how that gent *knowed* . . . the Skag Garone racket!"

"Yeah, but—"

"You recollect you and me fought that mounted cop in El Paso and you potted him, and you givin' it out since, private, among us as knows yuh, that you killed that man Dory?"

"Shore I killed him—deader'n—"

"*Nada*, Tev, you didn't! That's the same Dory, and what's more Clem jist told me back there that accordin' to the letter they found in this Dory's pocket, he's the hombre that they used to talk about on the border as the law-hawk that never come back without his man—"

"Yuh don't mean—!"

"Yeah, I do. *He's the one they called El Montero!*"

Skag Garone of border outlaw record stiffened in the saddle and his lips froze over exclamations of unbelief and finally died in the proof at hand. His fingers fumbled and he swore at vain attempts to roll and light a cigarette in the downpour. But he recovered his composure quickly.

"Listen to me! We've got this pot of jack good as delivered, and we ain't goin' to dance to the racket of no man's six-shooter, less'n any at a gunman from Texas that yores truly kin lick standin', ridin' or settin'. It on'y means that we got to see that Tehanno before we even hunt fer Miss Jean Pardmore." He laughed huskily. "First we wait here fer Powder, and when he comes, we'll send him back to steer them three that went up the canyon. If Powder meets 'em accidental, on the way down, he won't help 'em none. We kin ride back to the pens now, and next we line out fer that hook-jaw geeraffe Dory. Unless the buzzards is pickin' his bones before the night is ought, there ain't no sich birds in Arizona!"

21

IN THE meagre shelter of what was left of the lower house of 'Dobe Tombs—the south and west wall and a corner of the hand-hewn viga and clapboard roof—Menlo Dory stood for the moment inactive, uncertain and baffled, a dead flashlight in his hand. He had used the five-inch tube he had taken from the acting sheriff until the already weak batteries had quit, hunting on the rain-soaked mud floors and the ruins of both shacks for an opening that might secrete Jean and Bob Wilcox, if Tevizon had brought them here. His ears had listened for the faintest sound; there had been none.

But while inactive for a space of minutes, his mind was busy; he chafed at lost time, with not even a foe present who might be forced to tell where the prisoners had been taken. He had stayed until the early hours of morning, searching the place; had found that Pardmore's men had leveled all but one wall of the upper adobe and had partly wrecked the second when called away by his "confession." He began to doubt that the prisoners could have been brought here; he recalled that his only proof of it was the word of Carl Sands, and it may have been that Tomlinson and the rest had let out a bit of misinformation, thinking Sands would repeat it. He determined to leave and ferret out the whereabouts of the outlaw band.

Turning from the ruin toward the horse he had left picketed in the rain, he heard the plop of cautiously approaching hoofs; in a moment there was the murmur of voices. The nearest rider's words became distinct: "Take a pasear around them shacks, Lefty—we'll go this side." Darkness hid them.

"Bill!" The Texan stepped toward Wilcox of Bar W.

"Lordy, it's Menlo. I thought you was daid, when you never come back from the Tombs yesterday afternoon—after goin' down there for Skag Garone—"

"Things have happened! I'll talk fast." Menlo recited the events of

the afternoon and night, from the time of the shooting of the sheriff by Tevizon to the running off of Pardmore's Chevez herd by Gruber and other of Wilcox's own men, working with the Wagon Rod renegades. The cowman heard him with many interruptions and exclamations, shocked at Dick Berry's murder. "Dang me, I'm glad you dropped that traitor Cox; pity you didn't get Baca—I ain't seen Baca since yesterday. So Jean was with Bob! I cain't believe it! When I brung my men here last night it was because I thought Bob was alone, and I'm hunting him now. Why'n blazes they holdin' him and Jean, if they got the cattle?"

"I'm guessing; reckon you'll hear from them in the morning asking handsome pay for their trouble!"

"I savvy now why we couldn't find Gruber after postin' him and a bunch up the draw. What pulled us away from here a while ago was a rider goin' through—"

"LaMotte likely, from what Bob said about Tevizon sending him to get Gruber. That's the only thing that saved your cows. The point is, Bill, you and Lew Pardmore are at the same snubbing post. Lew's no more guilty than you are. Best thing for you to do is to pitch in with him to find Bob and his girl. He thinks Bob was back of it, but might know better by now, if Carl Sands told him what he knows. I'm in a hurry—one man can't comb this draw and mesa alone; you'd better do that with your bunch. And watch these Tombs! *Adios.*" He turned in the darkness.

"Where you goin'!"

"Up to that cabin in the canyon; they may have 'em there; anyway, I've got to have some definite point to work on."

"Take some of my men."

"No; a bunch might mean another battle with Wagon Rod; might even endanger the prisoners." He hurried away, found his horse, and rode toward the canyon, via Chavez.

Arriving at Sands' store, he found no trace of the proprietor, after hammering the doors and entering through the broken window. This might mean that Sands had joined Pardmore's riders, after exposing the real part played by Tevizon. Menlo stopped long enough to change horses, then struck out for the Cow-Thief Canyon shack.

The rain had almost ceased and the graying east proclaimed dawn as he pressed up the gulch, with a fresh mount under him, along the roaring Cow-Thief creek, now a torrent. Only at long intervals were cup-holes of myriad cattle hoofs visible in the mud; higher up, where the ground was harder and more rocky, they had been obliterated by the downpour entirely. Menlo passed near where he judged he had battled Full-House Cox; there was no trace of the body. Daylight had come when he drew up suddenly at the left of the canyon trail;

here the trampled underbrush showed where the cattle had been driven through.

He turned off. Up this ravine, where he had trailed Jean and Bob the previous evening, the cattle marks had been washed away, save for the brush signs. Menlo had gone by a dozen steps when he heard a rush of horses behind him. Screening himself, he saw four figures in the saddle in the early daylight; through the thick foliage of a white-leaf oak he identified the handsome cowboy, Langre, Panther Treck and Jim Ash. An instant later his features flexed at the sight of the florid, thick-necked Powder LaMotte.

"*Nada!*—they couldn't have gone through there!" It was LaMotte speaking.

"Yo're blind, hombre!" retorted Jim Ash. "They's even hair stickin' on them tramped bushes. Come on—"

"That ravine goes into a blind canyon," insisted Tevizon's confederate. "I reckon us four chased 'em up to the top of Cow-Thief last night, didn't we?"

"I don't care a damn—that herd went through right here. Who-a!" — The wrinkled veteran stared, raised his hands slowly.

Menlo's medium-length six-shooter barrel gleamed in the early light, riding level ahead of him as he stepped his mount out into the open. "Lift 'em high, cowboys!"

Quickly he disarmed the four.

"Now let's talk a minute."

His eyes were on the grimy-scarlet face of LaMotte. "First place, Jim Ash is right about the herd going through *here*. Second place, I'm going to shoot a certain rustler when I say 'ten' if he don't come clean. One, two, three, four—"

"Who yuh mean?" croaked LaMotte, features suddenly turned a sickly, dirty white.

"You," answered Menlo cheerfully. "Five, six, seven, eight—"

"Fer Gawd's sake, man, don't shoot! I'll come clean if yuh turn that gun away—" LaMotte's eyes roved from the steady gaze of the Texas man-tamer.

Menlo holstered his gun. "Waiting!"

"Well, Jim is right—them cattle went through here, drove by Gruber and Bar W—"

"Tell 'em Tevizon, Baizee, Tomlinson and yourself were mixed up in it! And don't stop till you've told it all," warned the lanky rider.

"Don't! I'm comin' clean. Tev an' Monk an' Tommy an' me was in it, but Tev is lookin' after the kidnappin' end. I'll tell yuh all yuh want to know if yuh give me a show to let me turn State's evidence—"

"You'll tell anyhow. Now talk, fast!"

Powder LaMotte did, answering Menlo's questions according to the facts so far as he knew.

Then the Texan asked: "Tev take Jean and Bob to that cabin above here?"

"No; he took 'em to 'Dobe Tombs."

"We'll make sure of *that*." Menlo did not want to run the risk of being thrown off-trail by a lie where the biggest game was concerned. He addressed the three Wagon Rod old-hand punchers.

"Reckon I can give you gents your guns now." He passed them over, ignoring the curling lip of Langre.

Jim Ash gave ample assurance of their mood. "Mister Dory, we *know* now yo're playin' this game from the top of the deck; I savvied from the way that galoot acted he was tryin' to cross-trail us. We'll be obliged if yuh'll let us light out after that herd."

"Sure; I'll go with you, far as the cabin, to check this hombre's confession. One thing more, LaMotte; where's Sands?"

"I took him up to the cabin an' locked him there."

"Get going!" Menlo shoved him ahead, took the trail in the lead of the other three.

Fifteen minutes' hard travel over the slippery trail brought them to the rincon and the tree-sheltered log hut.

Carl Sands found himself free a minute later; Menlo held a hasty conference with him, aside from the others. "Did these fellows take you before Lew Pardmore arrived—before you had a chance to tell Lew how things stood?"

"Must uv. I never seen Lew."

That was bad news, meaning that Pardmore was still in the dark about the criminals; still trusting Tevizon.

Menlo knew now that LaMotte had told the truth about Jean and Bob not being held in the cabin. He acted quickly.

"I'm going back, with this cow-thief. If you boys reckon you can handle that gang up above, trail ahead the way LaMotte indicated over the county line to the biggest gorge west."

Jim Ash's faded old eyes glistened. "Us three kin handle a dozen, that kind!" Panther Treek and Langre smiled grimly. Carl Sands wanted to go along if he "only had a gun." Menlo handed him the weapon taken from Powder LaMotte, and the four trotted up the mountain from the rincon.

Downward toward the main canyon trail the Texan escorted his rustler prisoner. The rain had ceased; the sky had cleared in the east, and when they reached the creek trail the canyon walls stood pink in the glow of the sunrise, the dripping trees vocal with song birds, and little rivulets humming in myriad places from sod and leaf-mold. There was cheer in a fresh new morning; what a pity Jean could not enjoy it! Menlo Dory would see.

Powder La Motte was talkative as they rode, and answered questions freely. Yes, Tev and the rest were going to hold Jean and Bob

for ransom; Tev was a hound for smelling out things he wanted to know; had learned Wilcox and Pardmore both owned their range and stock clear; their notes were good for real money at the Ranger bank, and Pardmore had got an advance from the buyer of the young herd. LaMotte was through; he was ready to squeal on his pals to Lew and leave the country for good.

They passed the trading post, crossed the sun-bathed mesa, and Menlo guided his prisoner down the precipice into Hidden Valley and toward 'Dobe Tombs draw.

"Thought you was goin' to take me to Lew," grunted the rustler un-
easily.

"Maybe I am, *after you point out that holing-up place in the adobes.*"

"Tev and Full-House was the on'y ones that knowed it," whined the outlaw. "I'm willin', but I can't find it."

"You'll find it," affirmed the Texan positively, producing his six-shooter and examining it critically. He sheathed it again and led the prisoner down into the draw. As he neared the partially demolished walls of the two adobes, his gaze caught the hindquarters of a horse, beyond the farthest wall.

"Somebody's there!" shot out LaMotte nervously. "We better go easy."

Menlo did not slacken his pace, but when a hundred yards from the upper house he dismounted and ordered his prisoner to do likewise. They went forward on foot, rounded the first adobe and approached the two standing walls of the lower shack. Menlo halted.

"That hombre's *inside*. He wasn't in view from the other end, and he's not on this side. I want you to march in there, LaMotte, and show me just where he is!"

"But that hoss bears Bar W brand," protested the prisoner. "Bar W don't know, now that Full-House is daid—" He stared at the other's hand, carressing the protruding butt of his gun, and his eyes looked into those of the Texan only to waver in alarm. "I'll show yuh—I'll show yuh!"

He rounded the corner of the broken wall, Menlo at his heels, and entered the partly enclosed rectangle of what had been the interior. Menlo's gun was drawn; he suddenly tensed, at the soft sound of stirrup leather. The horse on the outside of the wall stirred, pounded hoofs. The Texan darted to the end of the wall, fired through the streaking rider's sombrero, in quick command to halt.

The fleeing horse went back on its haunches, turned, and Menlo beheld the grinning features of the mahogany-hued half-breed, Baca, whose left hand fumbled to tuck away a bit of white in the pocket of his dirty checkered shirt. Baca approached leisurely.

Menlo turned the corner, to keep Powder LaMotte in sight. But

the prisoner was gone. The enclosure in which he had stood a few seconds before held no man.

With six-shooter covering Baca, the Texan rounded the right-angle of the standing walls, to make sure LaMotte had not dodged behind the enclosure. He came back to the man in the saddle, whose right arm was bandaged—Menlo recalled how that wound had been received. The breed's holster was at his left hip, however.

"What do El Montero want?" queried Baca, showing gleaming, uneven teeth. "I can't shoot!"

"Turn over that holster; shake out your gun."

"Sure!" Baca flopped out the big Colt.

"Move over here a few minutes where I can keep an eye on you." The Texan drew him before the adobe, then went in and gave the place a thorough going-over, walls, roof and floor. He took his time, bent on finding some clue to Powder LaMotte's disappearance. Chagrined, he was forced to give it up; his prisoner was lost. But he had another.

"Now let's see that paper you stuck in your pocket!"

"Sure!" Baca slowly produced it, still grinning amiably. "It is for Mister Pardmore, and if Lew don't get it, so he can bring the money, it will be bad for his girl."

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THE half-breed extended the paper with a great show of courtesy, then removed his sombrero and fingered the bullet hole. "Lucky for Miss Jean you did not shoot lower," he said smilingly, while the Texan scanned the crude, pencil-scribbled epistle:

Lew: Dont stall Lew old boy if you value yure daughters hide. Bring the money fifteen thousand paper bucks to the lower dobey shack and lay it on the floor or she will be shot pronto or worse. Send one man with it only and we got to have said jack by one o'clock today Friday or kiss yure girl goodbye!!! This aint any bluff we know you can get the money at the bank right off. One other thing you and yure bunch stay away from dobey toombs, or shes a dead angel. Dont try no tricks. One more thing if Mr. Baca the messenger is harmed and aint back here by the time set yure girl will die suddent or else mebbe we might even take her for a long trip acrost the line into Sonora and you certiny wont ever set eyes onto yure baby again.

Gruber
Baca
Dory

"Better read that last line twice, amigo," grinned the breed, "and see how lucky your sweetie was that your bullet didn't come any closer!"

"Watch how you refer to *her*, hombre, or I'll lose my good judgment and drill you!" The Texan sheathed his gun slowly, took up the fallen weapon of the renegade. "That means Tevizon just wrote the note somewhere in these 'dobes," he said gruffly. "Now dig up the other one you've got for Bill Wilcox."

Baca laughed easily. "It is already delivered," he said smoothly. "Look! We are having visitors, and I don't reckon I'll have to ride to Wagon Rod after all!"

The Texan caught the jogging heads and big hats beyond the draw, from the direction of the Pardmore home base; horses topped the rise swiftly and broke into a run down the slope of the draw, toward the adobes. Menlo saw Baca's eyes focused on an object in the upper house; he turned quickly, glimpsed the vanishing figure of a man—Baizee, from his new black boots. Leaving Baca, he went toward the ruin slowly, gun in hand. He found it empty. The approaching Pardmore riders had stayed the hand of the assassin, he concluded. Tevizon would not want to jeopardize the bigger haul.

Abruptly the riders in the draw spread out, slowed and approached with rifles and six-shooters in hand; they seemed confused at the manner in which Baca and the Texan held their ground, in the open; but there was no mistaking their purpose.

Menlo raised his two hands in the Indian peace sign, knowing that if Pardmore gave the order to shoot things would fare badly for Jean. Baca's letter was not a bluff, in any sense, he realized, and his first thought was of the girl. The half-breed called out amusedly, "You goin' to hand 'em the letter?"

It looked bad for him, the Texan admitted to himself, being found by Pardmore with Baca at the Tombs as though in a friendly conference, and with the letter in his possession at the moment, containing his own signature. There was an element of humor in it, regardless of the seriousness of the situation; if Menlo had had a pencil, he reflected, he would have written in the name of Tevizon, erasing his own. But he had no pencil; he ripped off the last and bottom name, and handed back the note to Baca as Lew Pardmore, leading the riders, called for him to keep both hands high.

There were six in the Wagon Rod party, the two on the outer flanks moving back to surround their quarry. Pardmore with Pete York and two others spurted up aggressively, faces hard-set. "We're goin' to shoot a pair of snakes pronto, there bein' no tree to hold a rope handy," barked Pardmore grimly, flourishing his six-shooter. "We're goin' to shoot you both inside two minutes if you don't talk—and talk fast—tellin' where you got my girl!"

"Not me," grunted Baca, showing his big teeth. "I've been ridin' to find you." He lowered his hands, flipped the sheet of paper from his pocket. "Wanted to make it easy for you to get your girl back! Read this!" He held it out, while the cowman, with an impatient swerve in the saddle, tore it from his hand. For a long minute the riders sat motionless, eyes on their boss. Pardmore's face flushed red and his jaw was outthrust as he jammed the note into his shirt.

"That won't go down!" he thundered suddenly. "We're goin' to kill you both, like we would sheep, if you don't tell us where you got her. We'll get her, too, you orn'ry coyotes! Now talk!" He leveled his weapon on Baca. "Cut down on this other un the minute I shoot!" he called out to his riders.

"You're making a mistake, Mr. Pardmore," drawled the Texan quietly. "That message means business, and I wouldn't put it past that bunch to do what they say. Miss Jean's in there now, with Bob Wilcox," gesturing toward the adobe ruins. "There are men in there, too, that will shoot if you fire on Baca—and they won't hesitate to kill your daughter."

"Of course you'd argy for 'em, havin' confessed to kidnappin' my girl! Are yuh goin' to talk?"

"Yeah, I'll talk. Not two hours ago I got a confession from Powder LaMotte that Tevizon was working this game—met LaMotte up the canyon, trying to steer your men from the trail of your stolen herd. Jim Ash and Langre and Treek heard it; they know the truth and are on the right trail of the cattle now with Carl Sands. I brought LaMotte down here, when I ran into this fellow Baca, and while I was looking after him, LaMotte got into the Tombs—he's in there yet with Tevizon. Baca had just come out, after Tevizon had scribbled that note he's carryin'—"

"A pack of lies!" flung out the cowman, rage in his eyes. "We passed LaMotte leavin' this draw, and Tev's back there three mile. They just rode away from here."

"I'm not used to letting men call me a liar, Mr. Pardmore. That's LaMotte's horse up there with mine." He pointed to the pair of saddle-mounts cropping the grass of the draw.

"If you're not a liar, confessin' one minutue you stole Jean, and the next tryin' to lay it onto men that's yore betters, I don't know what a liar is. Now talk, in two seconds, or I'm damned if I don't shoot you. Go for yore gun!"

There was the look of the righteous killer administering swift justice in the eyes of the cattleman. Menlo realized how improbable his own story must sound. His thought was of Jean's safety as he replied, with a sinister threat:

"I hold trumps, Lew! Hold your daughter's life in my hands, too, if I'm the crook you insist I am. Understand? If I *am* one of this

outlaw bunch, and you start shooting, I'll promise you it'll be Jean's death warrant. Now help yourself!"

He folded his arms, met the steady gaze of the cowman with calm, unemotional eyes. In his heart he admired the courage of Lew Pardmore and his fine fighting spirit—Pardmore had not even disarmed him, but had given him the chance to draw when he must know himself to be no match for the stranger from Van Horn. But again there was no opportunity for persuasion save that of force. If Pardmore insisted he was a kidnapper, he would play that hand. And his sudden change of front had its effect.

"Now yo're runnin' yore true brand, for the killer and renegade you are!" raged the cowman. "I reckon you *do* hold trumps, for the minute, Dory, when you stake my girl's life to let you live. Time'll come when you pay for this, hombre! And you a friend of me and Jean, tryin' to find her, tryin' to save my herd, even!" He laughed derisively. "I reckon, as my friend, you'd advise me to pay over the fifteen thousand, too, wouldn't you?"

"I would," returned the Texan seriously, "if I was you and wanted my daughter back. I'm riding. I'd advise you to let this fellow Baca trot along in his own way until you've got your daughter safe and sound in your own hands."

He turned aside, strode up the slope to his horse, mounted and rode toward Ranger. Lew Pardmore spurted out from the rest and galloped after him.

"If you're going to Ranger, I want to warn you, Dory, that Tevizon and my other men don't know the play you pulled on me, and they're under orders to pot you on sight. You'd better wait till I countermand them orders."

"Suits me to let 'em stand," returned Menlo cheerfully, and broke away.

Impossible as it had seemed to him that Lew Pardmore had seen LaMotte and Tevizon back of the draw as the Wagon Rod riders had entered, the Texan knew that the cattleman would not lie. That Tevizon had dispatched Baca from the Tombs with the note there was no doubt, and if LaMotte had got out of the adobe ruins and the draw, on a secreted horse, the feat was little short of amazing. Menlo wanted to verify these things. Why had not Tevizon and LaMotte joined Pardmore coming in? There was but one answer: they had other urgent business, probably a last-minute gathering to make plans according to the reception given their demand for ransom. They would not be able to learn Wilcox's and Pardmore's intentions about the money by remaining in hiding; they would go to Ranger, at their hangout, the Jinglebob Saloon, to confer and garner in gossip and watch for the appearance of the cowman at the bank.

While the Texan had honestly told Pardmore his opinion that it

would be unsafe to refuse to pay the ransom, for Jean's sake, he had no intention of surrendering the field to the criminal band. Rather, he was prepared now for a final showdown, *before the ransom could be paid*. There was but one way to bring it about—through a personal meeting with the diminutive outlaw chieftain.

Riding at a steady lope toward the cow town, Menlo gave no heed to the cavalcade of Wagon Rod men who followed some distance behind. He smiled grimly at Pardmore's offer to call off Tevizon from the "shoot-on-sight" order to protect Jean. Pardmore did not know *why* the former border killer was so bent on ending the career of the man on his trail.

When Menlo reached the end of the street he fell into a walk, noted the unusual number of cowpunchers and idlers on the board sidewalk, and the furtive, none too friendly looks cast his way. Several riders were loitering in the dusty thoroughfare, and one of them, a ruddy-faced youngster sporting a flaming neckerchief, reared his mount near him. When, a few doors down, the Texan dismounted at the hitch-rack, the other crowded in next him, busying himself knotting the reins.

"Mister Dory," he droned out of a corner of his mouth, "don't pay any attention to me, but listen. Bill Wilcox sent me. Folks are powerful ag'in' you, town's het up for a fare thee well, holdin' you killed the sheriff and know where Jean is. Yo're bein' groomed for gunplay where you won't have a chance. Tevizon and his bunch are in the Jinglebob now, waitin' for you to walk down the street—"

"LaMotte in there, too?" queried Menlo, anxious to know if the escape from the Tombs had been real.

"Yeah. And Bill Wilcox is in town too now; he says for you either to ride out of town, pronto, or get down there with him quick as you can, *on this side uh the street*. That's all." He finished his laborious straining at his saddle gear, slip-knotted the reins at the rack and ambled off.

They had stood across from the Jinglebob, in front of a frame hall building topped by a cupola and small eight-inch bell—a school on weekdays, a church on Sundays. Without giving the cowboy answer, the former ranger turned leisurely and bent his steps across toward the Jinglebob.

As his lanky legs seached the raised sidewalk and he was in the midst of his upward stride to the planking, the swinging doors of the saloon bounced open and a wiry little figure wearing a chin-strap and thonged-down twin holsters stood on the boards outside.

He was not even looking at the Texan. His body was turned sideways, head two-thirds toward the wall. Almost out of sight, his left hand was jerking up a gun, his right suddenly flashing in a fanning movement against the upraised hammer. Lead streamed from his

pistol, and the school bell clanged, bullet-pecked, one, two, three, four, five, far up across the street.

Abruptly his small head jerked around and his deep-set, sinister eyes were on Menlo Dory. The Texan had stepped onto the sidewalk as the outlaw's gun flashed around.

"El Montero!" came the sibilant banter. "Now's yore time to go man-huntin'!"

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IN THE brief period that had poured the five resounding taps of alarm on the school bell, causing idlers to stare, then back away into doorways, the Texan perceived the ruse of the killer's fanning hand and his unmistakably accurate left—to draw Menlo's attention from the gunman's real purpose and withhold the ex-ranger's draw until too late, with all the advantage with the man who already held his weapon in hand.

This was typical of Skag Garone—the Tevizon of Hidden Valley—a lover of the spectacular and a past master of the art of feint. But Dory had not come there to be shot down, as the suddenly ferocious, hard-lined face muscles recorded with the cat spring of his lean body sideways and the jet of white flame at his hip.

Tevizon had had the advantage, by a margin; otherwise there would have been one roaring report instead of two, and the one would have come from the gun of Menlo Dory. But Tevizon had got his hammer home, against the loaded cylinder with that sweeping hand jerking the prong of the triggerless forty-five, at the instant that the Texan streaked his bullet with a matchless draw.

Followed, for the fraction of a second, the amazing spectacle of two well night unequaled pistol duellists remaining on their feet, unwavering, giving no sign of hurt—yet each had driven forth a slug of metal that would have knocked the other down, and at eight feet the marksmanship was beyond question. The bony jaw of the flat-nosed gunman dropped, in swift amazement. His Colt was empty now, and he dared not go for its holstered mate while his foe stood with the draw already made. The tiny eyes of the killer dilated with the realization that he was still alive, as much as with the unbelievable proof that El Montero remained upright and refused to topple, dead.

Swiftly the wide lips of the Texan flattened and turned upward in a sardonic smile. His eyes, quicker than that of Tevizon, had seen the fleck of dust between two broken boards of the sidewalk. Only one thing could have put a bullet there.

Rare as was the meeting and fusion of hurtling lead in mid-air—Menlo had never seen it in his long career—he knew then what would

be found where the dust had stirred, for only thus could either of those missiles have failed its mark. Menlo owed his life to the speed with which he matched the advantage of his foe. It was a happy accident, too, in that it spared Tevizon, for Menlo had not come to shoot him now; only the outlaw's act had forced the attempt. If the border killer died here, Jean and Bob Wilcox might pay the penalty. On the heels of the outlaw's quick recovery from his uncertainty he heard the Texan's words:

"I've come to tell you, Skag Garone, that if you don't send Jean and Bob unharmed from the draw by twelve oclock today, *before the ransom is paid*, I'm going to have to shoot you on sight." He said it quietly, without show of bravado.

The little gunman's lips curled. "*When* you hold the drop, like yuh do now! Sack yore gun, Tehanno, if yuh think yo're able, and try again!"

With a quick thrust Menlo holstered his weapon; he was on the verge of hesitating, did not want to jeopardize Jean by battling the kidnapper now. But when the challenge was uttered, he knew he must prove he could fulfil his threat if the outlaw balked at the terms laid down. With hands empty, on an even footing with the killer—one loaded gun each—he watched the other's middle, waited for him to show his speed, conscious of retreating figures to left and right—those who had come forward a few steps, only to seek hasty cover again. Not even Baizce, Tomlinson or LaMotte showed themselves from the Jinglebob to aid their chief.

Tevizon still had confidence he was the best gunfighter in Arizona. He showed it now, making no haste, but resorting to the old trick of trying to enrage his foe, unnerving him by taunting banter.

"Dory! El Montero! Musta called you that because yuh done a heap of rabbit-huntin' on the Rio! Yo're a house-cat, and a coward, like I proved when I laid yuh on yore back in El Paso! Comin' to Hidden Valley to take Skag Garone, are yuh?" He laughed in mockery. "Why, you pore danged fool, yuh ain't even able to play Lew Pardmore; I've whispered in his ear you stole his cattle, killed the sheriff and corraled his daughter, and he believes it!" His words were uttered in a low sneer. "He's even delegated me to shoot yuh, for a spy and lady-snatcher, and when I do that trick, hombre, I'm goin' to collect, and mebby Jean'll come back, and mebby she wont—"

He did not finish. The gun of the Texan, at the hip, belched twice. Without lifting his gaze from Tevizon, Menlo had seen in his unfocused range of vision the almost imperceptible opening of the doors of the Jinglebob, a crack the width of a gun barrel, and the snake head of a muzzle just over the hat of Tevizon. The first shot upward to the saloon had been sufficient to halt the hand of the suddenly crouching outlaw chief, and when the second had gone its way, the killer's service-

worn six-shooter and its scuffed holster had parted at the belt; a bullet had pounded into the jutting walnut handle and Tevizon's gun had popped out to the boardwalk. The doors of the Jinglebob swayed, closed. There was no sound, but the pistol of the hidden foe was gone.

"Garone! I came to Hidden Valley to take you back to Texas. I'm going to take you yet, but I'm not an officer. If I was I couldn't trade with you; but this is personal. You've played a devilish game—and I'm offering this for the sake of that girl and boy. Bring 'em back, and I'm off your trail for a month—you can skip the country. I'll go get you later; but you'll have your chance, though I promise you I'll never quit till I stop you. If you don't bring them back by twelve today I'm going to show you how easy El Montero can kill a lizard!"

Menlo backed away, holstering his Colt, crossed the street at an angle and reached the sidewalk near the schoolhouse-church, whose bullet-ringing bell a few minutes before had startled the citizenry.

He proceeded up the street at an easy stride toward the sheriff's office, without forgetting to observe the actions of Tevizon, still standing over his fallen holster. As Menlo left the sidewalk he saw the little gunman take up his filled weapon and reload the other, then turn quickly into the Jinglebob. Lew Pardmore and Pete York followed him in. Menlo regretted that the Wagon Rod owner could not have heard Tevizon's own confession of guilt, but he had spoken so that no ears could hear save the Texan's and his own followers'.

Bill Wilcox, again in the sheriff's office, had watched the encounter from up the street. "I'd have give you a hand, Menlo, if it wasn't I knowed you'd manage it better without any divertin' complications. Man, how you kin handle a six! When that devil rung the bell I shore was scairt it was a trap. What'n mischief did he do that for, anyway?"

Menlo told him how the ruse of the sixth shot had failed.

"Clem here has been won over," Wilcox enlightened him. "I laid all the cards on the table, 'bout Garone killin' the sheriff, you confessin' just to git us from the Tombs last night, and all. On'y thing Clem cain't forgive is you liftin' his gun." The cowman frowned. "But gettin' down to business, I showed Clem that blackmail note I got—"

"Let's look at it, Bill."

Menlo found it almost identical with the one received by Pardmore. "Who delivered it?"

"That tarantaler Baca. I'd've killed him on the spot, if I wasn't half scairt they might take it out on Bob. You reckon I better turn over the money, Menlo?"

The Texan nodded grimly. "If Bob isn't out by one o'clock, you'd better do it, Bill." In explanation, he told of the ultimatum he had delivered to Tevizon.

"And if he don't come through, there ain't any other way out?"

"Yeah, there might be—but I'd advise you not to hold up the

money. Sheriff, you're convinced now I'm playing a square game?"

"This thing of blackmailin' Bill, along with Pardmore, proves it, and ought to open Lew's eyes. I talked Bill out of goin' to Lew—Lew would swear it was a frame, him hatin' him like he does. I'm goin' to have a talk with Lew Pardmore pronto; that'll convince him," Chafee declared.

Menlo nodded. "Do it before he gets out of town; but be sure you see him alone, where Tevizon won't get the drift; he wouldn't hesitate—"

"I know it. Seems like that bullet scratch in yore back is mighty swollen." He examined the wound. "And you must be starved. Come along."

They went out and to the restaurant two doors down, Menlo taking his seat against the wall, where he could watch the door. He ate hastily. "It's eleven now; I'm going up on the west rim above the draw, where that little motte of shrub cedar overlooks those adobes—if you should want to see me about anything. You'd better hustle over and talk to Lew, Clem."

The three left the eating-house; if there was hostility toward Bar W and Menlo Dory, the presence of the acting sheriff had a quieting effect. That official crossed toward the Jinglebob, Bill Wilcox started down for the bank, and the Texan proceeded to the hitch-rack, mounted and rode north without further molestation from Tevizon or his men.

When an hour later he lay under the cover of the little clump of five-foot cedars overlooking 'Dobe Draw, he watched the hands of his big silver timepiece turn slowly to twelve. Through the binoculars that the bald-headed Dick Berry had used on the Bar W slope opposite on the day before, he scanned the inner corner of the two remaining walls of the lower adobe with intent eyes. Twelve-fifteen arrived, and the half-hour after, and there was no sign of either of the prisoners being released. It was plain that the kidnappers were waiting for their thirty thousand dollars cash, fifteen from each of the big cattle outfits.

24

WHILE the sun beat down from a brassy sky, Menlo Dory continued to watch the adobe ruins with minute care from his point of vantage half a mile away. Occasionally he shifted the focus of the glasses to the upper house, only one wall of which remained standing after the wrecking activities of the Wagon Rod men. But after another fifteen minutes had passed without the delivery of the prisoners in the draw, he concentrated on the lower shack, into which Tevizon had more than once vanished and where LaMotte had dropped from sight that morn-

ing. Here, in the corner of the remaining right-angle walls, the Texan believed rested the key to the Tombs mystery.

Dropping his glasses for a moment, Menlo searched the landscape for trace of riders. Bill Wilcox must be sending his messenger with the wad of currency by now, and Pardmore, too. Suddenly the Texan saw a movement on his right, on the rim of the draw toward the Wagon Rod—the hatless heads of horsemen sitting their saddles well behind the crest. Pardmore's men had come to watch, but they were carefully remaining where they would not be seen from the adobes in the draw. A moment later one of their number rode briskly over the slope and down toward 'Dobe Tombs. Pet York was carrying the money.

Turning, Menlo beheld another rider halfway down the slope from the Bar W side. The binoculars revealed the clean-cut features of Wilcox's foreman, Getty. Getty would reach the Tombs first. There would be no war now between the outfits; Menlo wondered if Clem Chafee had convinced Pardmore that Wilcox too was being blackmailed; that Tevizon and the other importees were the men running this show. He shifted the focus of the glasses on the corner of the lower adobe again, intent on what would happen there after the money had been left.

Only consideration for Jean's safety would have induced the Texan to allow matters to go this far. But for that he would have started on a swift hunt for Tevizon. He did not doubt the outlaw chieftain was secreted in 'Dobe Tombs. It was only a matter of time until he would have come out, and then—

The Texan jerked up at sound of a horse behind him, under the brow of the hill facing Pardmore's men. He saw Clem Chafee dismounting, and the acting sheriff came running up to the dwarf cedars.

"Dory, it ain't any use—Lew won't hear to a word, sayin' it's a Wilcox lie, and him and Tevizon is stickin' together like brothers, so I couldn't argy—he's plumb sot on you bein' guilty, and yore gun-play in Ranger only convinced him the more, and with Tevizon, Baizec, Tomlinson and LaMotte with him, fillin' him with what they was goin' to do to get the money back—"

"Where's Tevizon now?" queried Menlo quickly.

"Right back there with Lew and his bunch."

"Back there with Lew?" repeated the Texan, scratching his head in puzzlement. "I figured they'd sure be in the Tombs—"

"It's ridic'ulous." Clem laughed bitterly. "If you was to guess, you couldn't figure what they're goin' to do! That Wilcox foreman Getty has left the money and Pete York will have his Wagon Rod roll on the pile in a couple minutes—"

"What is Tevizon going to do?" asked Menlo, leveling the binoculars again on the adobe.

"He's argied Lew into leavin' him go down there to pot the kidnap-

pers as soon as they come out of their hole to take the money!" Clem whistled softly. "What'n blazes you think of *that*?"

The Texan's eyes glinted strangely. "I'd laugh, if it wasn't so blamed serious. You're not kidding me, Sheriff?"

"I wisht I was. Nossir. Lew had made up his mind to pay over the ransom, without a scrap, to make sure Jean wouldn't be hurt—and I advised him that would be wise, too, knowin' you told Bill to pay if the prisoners wasn't delivered by one o'clock. Jingoos! It's a minute after one now—York's ridin' back. Look—there they come now!"

Menlo lowered the glasses quickly and turned his eyes on the four figures that had suddenly left the crest of the slope. At that distance they were easily identified—Tevizon, Baizee, LaMotte and Tomlinson, in order.

"What are we goin' to do?" demanded the excited officer.

"Let 'em ride," commented the Texan grimly. "I wonder Lew didn't hand the money to Skag Garone outright, without all this palaver!"

"Yessir—Tev talked him into leavin' 'em go down and approach the Tombs from the lower end—sneakin' up on the outlaws as they grabbed the pile—see, they're windin' around now to get on Bar W range, so they can trick them kidnappers!" He laughed huskily, and the Texan's lips widened in a sour smile at the spactacle.

"They sure had to get down there, somehow," drawled the Van Horn man, "or they'd be out of their pile. We can't do a thing to halt 'em yet, either, because they've got to get into the Tombs before they can release their prisoners. When that happens, I reckon we might start something, Clem." Menlo trained the glasses again on the adobe walls, and waited.

Pete York was riding back rapidly to rejoin the Wagon Rod group, while Tevizon's band curved around to the east side of the draw. After many minutes they passed the ruins and dismounted fifty yards away, then drew up on foot, single file.

"They're not even keepin' out of sight," asserted Clem, grinning, "like they would do if they was carryin' out the kidnappers' orders. I wonder Lew don't see now what their game is."

Menlo did not reply, for his sole interest just now was the maneuver about to be executed at the Tombs. Tevizon and his three confederates were for the moment out of view, behind the standing walls. Presently the little grunman's head appeared at the edge of the easterly wall; hat in hand, he peered around the corner. The humor of this bit of burlesque, staged for the benefit of Lew Pardmore waiting back of the slope, was not lost on Menlo Dory; but his thoughts were on the serious business of observing how they would drop from sight.

At that distance Clem Chafee, without field glasses, could see the pantomime of the moving figures, and when Tevizon suddenly glided

around the edge of the wall and stooped, the officer gripped the Texan's arm.

"Yeah, he got the money," drawled Menlo, whose binoculars had made every move plain. "Now I want to see him get *in*."

"In where?"

"His secret tunnel—" The Texan cut off, gripped the glasses with a steady hand, gazed intently, fascinated. The outlaw chief had stepped back to the pile of fallen adobe bricks of what had been the west wall, the one nearest Menlo. He bent a moment, then stepped down and out of sight.

Due to the pile of broken and disordered mud bricks, the vision of the Texan was cut off from the exact spot where Tevizon had disappeared. As he gazed, Monk Baizee scurried around the corner, entered the enclosure and followed in the wake of his chief. Tomlinson and LaMotte came and went, in order.

"Gone!" ejaculated Clem Chaffee. "And that skunk even told Lew his theory was that you and Baca and Gruber had a tunnel down there between those shacks—that was the argument that made Lew willin' to send that bunch down, I reckon. Now what?"

"He mentioned a tunnel to Lew, eh?"

"Yep—said it must connect them two 'dobes, which would explain how that bunch of killers could hop around from one to the other, and all."

Menlo's mouth tightened. "It *does* connect those two," he affirmed, "*but it does more*."

"Yuh mean—"

"If there wasn't *another* way out he'd never told Lew that. And I reckon that *other* way explains how he and LaMotte got out of the draw so soon this morning." He changed the subject. "Wonder what Lew is thinking about this time; if he's watching he must have seen that disappearing stunt—"

Lew's ridin'!" Clem gestured excitedly to southward.

Menlo jerked down the binoculars, turned to see the big cowman heading a bunch of eight riders at a gallop into the draw, toward the Tombs.

The Texan was on his feet, streaking back from the cedars. "Come on; we've got to head 'em off!" He ran for his mount, near where the acting sheriff had left his own horse. In a few seconds he was in the saddle, riding for the crest of the slope and over. Fortunately Pardmore's party had been posted back five hundred yards or more; their progress into the draw was swift, but Menlo was rapidly heading them, with Clem Chaffee close behind.

Their sudden appearance caused Lew Pardmore to slow, and Menlo's gesturing hand, raised high, brought him to a stop a moment before the Texan dashed among them.

"Don't go down there!" gritted Menlo, and there was chill warning in his tone. "Stay back, like they ordered you to, or those devils might carry out their threat!"

Lew Pardmore's face was white, his eyes gleaming with mingled chagrin and rage. "We've been tricked. God, I don't know what to think!" he shot out huskily. "Did Tevizon go in there? Has he double-crossed us? Hell, I know he has! Menlo, you couldn't be mixed up in this, or you wouldn't be here, watchin'! *You'd be down there!* Man, forgive me—"

"RIDE back—all of you!" commanded Menlo sharply. "We've got to give 'em their chance!" He swept his long arm toward the slope.

Completely docile, with all his haughty pride driven from him, Lew Pardmore turned his mount. "We'll have to do it, boys, like Mister Dory says." He led the way.

Back again beyond the rise, Menlo with the others remained in the saddle, heads on a level with the rim of the draw. While Pardmore poured out explanations and apologies for his blundering obstinacy of the last few days, the Texan, unanswering, watched the Tombs through Dick Berry's doubly useful binoculars.

For ten minutes they watched, while the big cowman's alarm grew, with no evidence of prisoners released. "Dory," he groaned, "if they don't make good their promise, after I paid over the money, I'll spend every cent I got and take the trail in a dozen counties to kill those curs! Why don't they give me back my girl? Dory, why don't you talk?—*won't they give me my Jean?*" His strong voice broke.

"They might have her pretty far back in that hole—slow getting out," said the Texan, more hopefully than he felt. His eyes remained glued to the twin orifices of the binoculars, under his wide range hat, penetrating the dancing heat waves of the treeless, brushless draw, centered on the spot where the Wagon Rod importees had vanished. Though it was not yet clear how they had gone down, or how the wreckers of the adobes could have overlooked an opening at that spot, there was no doubt of the location now.

Abruptly the tall form in the saddle tensed, leaned forward, as the focused lenses revealed the rising head and shoulders of a man, lifting himself out. Jumping to the ground, the man turned, and the Texan saw he was Bob Wilcox. An impulsive shout escaped the lips of Lew Pardmore, and Pete York boomed the thought in the minds of all: "Bob Wilcox or I'm a coyote—he's turned loose!"

"It's Bob," confirmed Menlo quietly. Hope beat high in his breast that, after all, Tevizon would free both hostages, having obtained the heavy ransom money. He did not remove his glasses from the spot, and waited eagerly for another figure to appear, while hardened men of the range about him droned cheering words of encouragement for the ears of their boss.

But the minutes sped by without further signs of life in the ruin, and then Menlo saw to his surprise that Bob Wilcox was not traveling toward the Bar W slope, but toward the Wagon Rod and the gathered riders. "What's he comin' this way for?" several wanted to know. The Texan's blue eyes darkened; he did not venture a guess.

But Bob Wilcox came on, afoot, making an effort to run. He rested

to a walk, noticeably winded after each slight exertion, then broke into another short, feeble run. He seemed to know there were men waiting beyond the slope toward which he was traveling. Only Tevizon or his men could have told him that!

"We've got to see him quick, and hear his story," asserted the Texan, with sudden decision, and spurred across the rise and down. Others were close behind. They reached young Wilcox half on the slope.

"Where is Jean?" asked Menlo steadily.

Bob's eyes were wide, his thin face drawn and haggard and his voice weak and quavering. "She's back in that underground room. Tevizon—brought me out—he told me to tell you the hole I came out of—to go up to the little clump of cedars—where you were—waiting alone." His voice shook. "He told me to see you, Dory, and tell you if you wanted Jean—to come and take her."

"God, no!" groaned the father.

"I'm afraid they're planning to take her away," panted the released man, sitting on the ground.

Menlo Dory bent from the saddle, shot out hasty words. "I don't figure it'll be as bad as that, Mister Pardmore. You take your three best riders back of that slope toward the precipice on the edge of the mesa, where those old cliff ruins are. Sheriff, you post a couple a mile east of there, and the rest of you go a mile west—and give me Pete York to stand guard over that upper adobe."

"And you, Menlo—where you goin'?" quavered the alarmed ranch owner.

"We're making a try to find your girl." The Texan's lips flattened out. He commanded Bob Wilcox to climb into the saddle behind him and beckoned Pete York, a cool-headed, accurate shot, to follow.

Quickly Bob described what he had learned about the underground passageways leading from the adobes, while the Texan with the double burden pressed his mount on toward 'Dobe Tombs.

"Right there's the hole—they intend it for your death-trap," young Wilcox warned as they reached the ruined walls.

"Don't you come in, Pete," the Texan admonished the Wagon Rod foreman as he glided from the saddle. "Watch that upper 'dobe, and if you see a reptile, kill it! Bob, you keep watch right here, after I go in."

MENLO dropped the four feet to the floor of the passageway, releasing his arms from the side of the hole in the adobe wall. "Put on that lid, quick!" he called to Bob. There was a sliding sound from above; the daylight in the shaft vanished. The Texan was in darkness, in the Tombs.

"That lid" had been one of the huge flat adobe bricks of the ruin, and Menlo, to avoid offering a target in the filtering daylight, had brought Bob to the shack only to reveal the entrance should it be closed again. But it was not closed, which told that Tevizon had left the hole open deliberately—to draw the Texan in.

Menlo remained standing, without advancing. Now he understood how simple and yet how diabolically deceptive had been the disguise at the orifice of the Tombs. He remembered how, before the wrecking of the abandoned houses, one wall of each had been broken down, within five feet of the ground. In this dip in the wall, outlaw hands had hollowed out a space big enough for a man to enter, cutting into the thick mud enclosure, capping it with one of the great slabs. To any eyes that might have searched, the dry, dusty brick cover seemed but part of the old wall, and even when Pardmore's men had torn down the high piles on either side, they had not disturbed it.

The Texan did not go farther underground immediately, for a reason. From Bob's hasty description he knew what to expect, and he had seen the tunnel at right angles to the opening as he entered. This passage lay east and west, connecting the two adobes, and if Tevizon were waiting to slay his Nemesis, he would be in that man-made channel, expecting the light of the opening to outline his quarry. The Texan smiled grimly; tricky Skag Garone had not counted on daylight being shut out so soon, if at all. Menlo was not putting his head and torso down—yet. He had, in fact, raised one leg; the other booted member only remained in the line of fire—he must chance that. . . . Perhaps Tevizon was mystified at the sudden blocking of the light; he would be waiting long enough to guess when the Texan's body filled the passageway, and undoubtedly his gun had found position at the first appearance of his foe's booted feet.

A muffled report. That was it! Tevizon had delayed a fraction over a minute, long enough for the hated El Montero to get well into the tunnel. Which he did not! Another shot in quick succession, and this time Menlo's boot tugged from the grazing impact; he thrust his elbows out to the sides of the entryway, raised both of his legs clear of the passage, as four more slugs drove viciously into the soft earth. The killer was taking no chances! Menlo emitted a gurgling groan and dropped.

Now was the time to strike, when Skag Garone thought his quarry safely bagged, and when he would have to shift to his second gun, with no way to guide the range in the utter darkness. The Texan was crawling, flat on the low approach, hands feeling the dank walls to left and right for the offshoot cavern that Bob Wilcox told him was there. He moved silently, swiftly, and the blackness hid the ferocious lines of the aroused man-hunter of old. Jean would not be in danger in terminating the battle now; she would not be here, but farther back—far back—in the cavern. Choking smoke drifted in the narrow artery; Menlo stifled a cough. He hoped Tevizon would come back to examine the carcass, or throw a light to verify his marksmanship. Only a light would be needed to give Menlo his target. But he feared Tevizon would do neither, in his confidence of his deadliness; that he would hurry to the escape after the trap had been sprung. Suddenly the outlaw caughed, from his own smoke.

The Texan's Colt blazed, in reckless disregard of the target the flash would present; he had shot at the sound, seeking what the gun-light would reveal farther up the passage. He followed it with another, for he had seen in the shimmer of his first shot not one object, but two—in motion at the edge of a vault that seemed to drop away from the passage. And the second flash, vivid in that black hole, had lighted a wavering figure. "Monk!" He heard Tevizon's husky voice. The wounded man was not Garone, but Baizee, and the flat-nosed gunman was around the corner. Menlo went forward rapidly on his knees. A gun-flare smote his eyes from the cavern edge. He gave answer, and boots resounded on the high vaulted floor beyond.

Silently the Texan closed on the staggering man blocking the dividing corridors; Monk Baizee yielded his gun without resistance. "Don't shoot!" he groaned. "You got me in the hip."

Menlo reached out, feeling the bigger opening, and slid down a few feet until his boots touched bottom. He was able to stand to his full height of six feet two, and reaching upward he could not touch the ceiling. Far down the cavern the hollow sound of high-heeled cow-boots died. Guiding himself with hand against the rocky wall, the Texan advanced cautiously, for the floor was uneven, crevassed. He reached a projecting barrier, carefully worked around it, and at that instant the blackness melted at the glimmer of a match far down, beyond another cornice; then a flood of light burst and glowed steadily a hundred yards away.

"A lantern," grated the man-hunter. He knew its purpose: to place a barrier of light he must cross, opening him to the fire of his foes.

Whoever of the remaining outlaws had lit the lamp were beyond the jutting rocks, out of view, and would be able to withdraw farther, find a vantage place, and wait for their prey.

The passage near the light seemed small, due to the distance; yet

Menlo was now aware he was in one of the large though little known natural caves of the southwest desert regions. Bald, barren rock, riven apart by some subterranean convulsion, formed walls, ceiling and floor, uneven, grotesque, a hundred feet high in spots, a dozen in others. Here where he stood the blue gloom had been lifted by the reflected faint light of the vivid lantern ahead; great shadows lay farther in front. Flitting objects in the yellow light and the beatings of wings in the gloom overhead told him bats were being stirred to activity by the lantern glow. Where the cavern ended the Texan did not know, Bob did not know; but Jean was beyond, in a dark chamber.

He moved forward, safely here, as the jutting rock before the lantern shrouded his progress. That the long grotto led to sunlight he was confident. The toe of his boot jarred loose an ancient, guano-covered demijohn. This had been a robber lair of other times. Before the Americans came to Hidden Valley, Mexican ladrones had uncovered it; probably had built the adobes to hide the entrance and connected the shacks with a man-made passage that struck the cave halfway between them, covering the old outlet. How Tevizon has stumbled upon the secret, Menlo did not know, but the Skag Garone of the border may have heard reports of it in Chihuahua or Sonora.

Menlo paused, where the amber light was stronger; he hugged the left wall, behind the rock barrier. Jean's rescue depended upon him now; she was bound, arms and feet, Bob had said. The Texan must get through, quickly, before one or more of Tevizon's men spirited her away, or before the outlaw wreaked swift vengeance upon her. He did not doubt they would do whichever was easiest. Speed was the big element of her safety. Suddenly El Montero leaped across the lighted width of the passage, gun blazing.

Glass shattered and the lantern toppled, lightless, in the trail of the report. A pistol roared in the cavern beyond him, but Menlo was on the right-side wall, firing where the flash had appeared.

Silence. The Texan ran swiftly forward; he had measured the distance where the floor of the caves was clear. Far down that last shot had been aimed, elevated for the range. As he ran, he heard a falling body, as though a great distance away and beneath him. Abruptly he halted, hugged the wall. He heard the taunting words of Tevizon, shouted from fifty feet ahead:

"Come on, Tehanno; LaMotte's right behind yuh now, and we got yuh where we want yuh!"

It may have been a feint, or Menlo may have passed a lurking figure in a crevasse who had deliberately let him get by to encompass him. Feeling the wall, the man-hunter found a jagged rock that would shield him from in front; he turned and fired behind him, into the black void, and dropped. His shot drew fire, as he had counted. LaMotte was there! On the instant the Texan's gun belched; there

was a scream of rage, but no countering shot. Menlo's face lit with a relentless smile; this was not a time to show mercy, if he were to reach Jean. He had warned Pete York not to follow him into the cavern so that he would be free to fight on all sides, without fearing for a friend. He had not taken Tevizon's challenge to shoot in the direction of the little gunman's voice—Tevizon would be behind a rock barrier somewhere, awaiting the flash, else he would not have spoken. Now the Van Horn man advanced again, slowly, taking stock. Monk Baizee and LaMotte accounted for, and one other—the one whose falling body had mystified the Texan. Tomlinson, or possibly Baca, this. It left two—Tevizon and one other.

Mindful of the sound from some deep spot below, Menlo glided forward easily. Suddenly his advancing foot failed to touch the floor of the cave. He bent one knee, let the other foot go down, until satisfied that here the unidentified outlaw had fallen. Some great hole this, for the body had been long in going down.

There was a pathway around this pit, Menlo knew, or a bridge across it; otherwise Tevizon would not have got over. Bob Wilcox had not mentioned it; perhaps he had been taken over in the darkness unawares. The two remaining outlaws were not shooting now; they knew of that dark trap! Then abruptly the Texan heard the sharp trip, trip of running boots—a pair of them. Garone and his confederate were feigning flight, to draw him on. Either that, or they considered the battle won and were racing to make off with their captive.

Menlo crouched at the wall edge and sent a bullet toward the second; but his eyes were on the chasm, ignoring the effect of his shot, watching what the flash would reveal in the black passage. He saw. Curving around a huge crevasse on the side of the cave opposite him was a hewn trail, cut in the rock by robber hands years before, doubtless. The man-hunter glided across, and with one hand against the rock wall skirted the rim of the yawning abyss, cleared it, and broke into a rapid but cautious run, traveling on the toes of his boots.

Suddenly the floor of the cave pitched forward, and Menlo found himself climbing, gun ready for the slightest sound or a flash of fire. The upward tilt continued for some distance; then in the passage above gleamed a faint trickle of what—daylight! He went on, recklessly disregarding chances of an ambush, for speed was paramount if Tevizon had reached Jean. He cleared the incline of the cave and abruptly broke into a rounded room, which he recognized instantly as an ancient kiva or ceremonial chamber of prehistorical cliff-dwellers. Broad daylight streaming from the circular opening in the ceiling revealed the Indian-built masonry of laminate sandstone, broken pottery, scattered deer bones and a stone fireplace.

Menlo stepped back quickly; this was the end of the cave, and the outlaws had climbed out, taking their crude ladder with them. On the

floor lay the severed hemp rope that had held their prisoner. The walls were too perpendicular to climb, and to reach the center of the ceiling would be impossible. The Texan remained out of direct line of the hole-door, for he had heard faint movement there. The lines of his face drew into a bitter mask, at dread of defeat, this late.

Suddenly he sprang aside as a heavy object dropped through the hole, thumping on the dirt floor like a battering-ram. He saw it was a long pine timber, one end digging into the ground, the top of it leaning against the aperture above. Across the huge pole at intervals lateral pieces had been secured in the fashion of the ancient pueblo ladders of the cliff-dwellers. Unseen hands had shunted the ladder down, and Menlo realized the ladder was an invitation and a challenge. Tevizon very plainly was not satisfied to leave without taking El Montero from his trail for good. He knew also the outlaw pair would be screened somewhere at the top waiting for him to ascend, their eyes airt for his head to appear from the kiva.

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THE Texan did not hesitate. Without the rustic lodge-pole ladder he could do nothing. Bounding to it, dropping his hat, he turned his face upward toward the opening, and with forty-five muzzle on the sky-hole, climbed.

The pole-stair had been dropped without the outlaws exposing themselves, since they shoved it down at an angle, but now they could not reach it without coming into view, if they had it in mind to shake him off, then fire upon him as he touched the ground. But Menlo did not anticipate such a move; he believed they would take cover—had probably already done so—and count on getting him as he emerged. All the advantages would be with them, for, quick as the Texan might be, he would not know in what direction to expect attack, and undoubtedly the outlaws would be on two sides.

The brilliant light of the faultless sky was blinding to him as he climbed, after the gloom of the cavern, and halfway up he slowed, while his pupils contracted slowly to adjust themselves to the glare. Possibly the outlaw pair had considered this factor. Menlo squinted through half closed lids, alert for a glint of steel. He decided to delay a little; that would draw them to the hole sooner or later, out of curiosity if nothing else.

For several minutes he held his ground. No, Tevizon had not thought of the sun-glare, or he would have chanced an exchange of shots before this. The Texan's great concern was for Jean's safety; Lew Pardmore's bunch could not be far off, for Menlo had sent them to the old cliff ruins, and if they should appear, Tevizon would not

hesitate to slay the girl if cornered, rather than let the Texan triumph. Where was Jean now? Had they bound her again—this time to a horse? Saddle-mounts would be cached at the cliffs, he knew. Thus had Tevizon and LeMotte got out of the Tombs so speedily before, riding on to the range from above the draw. A hunch that the aboriginal cave-dwellings might have to do with 'Dobe Tombs had led Menlo to send Lew Pardmore to them. The kiva could not be far from the precipice and the ruins.

The flat-nosed outlaw was not showing hasty curiosity in coming to the *estufa* opening. Menlo must not delay, lest one of the pair be leading Jean away, beyond recovery, while the other remained to get the ex-ranger. The man on the ladder moved downward; he had dropped his hat the better to face upward; now he recovered it, and, traveling up again toward the opening, he held the head-piece high, reached the rim and shoved it slowly above him. It did not draw fire—Menlo had hardly expected tricky Skag Garone to be deceived by so stale a ruse. Now there was no choice but to raise forehead and eyes over the edge, gun up, and seek out his quarry.

It was a long chance, for the direction would be uncertain and the Texan's lifted hand could not match the marksmanship of Tevizon from the hip. Realizing his handicap, he nonetheless raised cautiously.

He jerked back, on hearing a cautious hail behind him, down in the kiva. His glance revealed Bob Wilcox. Somehow the young cowman had managed to struggle through the underground passage in the Texan's wake, bent on doing what he could to aid in releasing Jean. Fortunately he had encountered no armed opposition after the way had been cleared. "Better go mighty careful at the surface there," Bob called out. "That ladder looks like a deadfall. . . ."

Menlo Dory stiffened as a weird, piercing scream cut off young Wilcox's further words. It was a woman's cry, from somewhere out on the mesa. It did not seem like the voice of Jean Pardmore, yet Menlo knew it could be no other.

There was both terror and a warning in that cry, and the Texan, forgetting everything in Jean's urgency, darted up to the top of the ladder. He reached the cleared surface as an outlaw gun roared at his left. He whirled and gave reply, downing his man.

Now he knew that the pistol of Tomlinson had not been discharged at him, but at a fleeing horse. To his momentary horror he saw that two shots had streamed after the cowgirl, now hanging full under the staggering animal. He beheld Tevizon, smoking pistol upraised, streaking over the ridge on a big black horse. Menlo fired at him as he dropped from sight. It was Tevizon who had shot at Jean in unison with Tomlinson, who lay unmoving in the sand, where the Texan's bullet had dropped him.

Menlo Dory cursed in sharp dismay. Grief, poignant, overwhelming,

was written in his gaunt face as he ran with long stride toward the stumbling cowhorse. "Jean! Jean!" he called chokingly. He reached her side. Startled, amazed, he heard her excited laughter, as she hung with sunlit hair trailing the ground. "They did not kill you either, did they, Menlo?"

He raised her back into the saddle from which she had fallen when the animal lunged with a bullet nicking the flesh of a foreleg. "Are you hurt, girl?"

"My feelings are hurt—sliding this way, on account of that string tying my feet!"

The Texan's knife severed the rawhide thong that bound her from stirrup to stirrup. She stepped down lightly, and Menlo stared; she was radiantly happy and vigorous, and, save for a slight paleness, none the worse for her grueling experience of the rainy night and the cave.

The Texan mounted her horse, to give pursuit of Tevizon. But the animal was limping painfully now, and he saw there was not hope of overtaking the outlaw at this stage. He stepped down from the saddle. "I wonder how they missed you," he said, facing her tranquilly. "Those two could shoot."

"I was on the *other* side, flung full out, *a la* rodeo," she laughed. "The rawhide didn't prevent that! Luckily I didn't lose my balance until they'd shot, and then they thought—" She gave a little cry. "Look—Daddy and the boys!"

Menlo had seen them, hurrying from two directions. "But why did you scream—so?" he asked, puzzled.

"I saw them, ready to shoot; knew you were coming out of that cliff house. They had me tied and the horse picketed in the sand. I screamed, frightened the horse and rode, and the picket pin came with us—"

"To draw their fire," he said slowly, reproachfully. "Miss Jean, you knew those men would be sure to kill you when you did that—and still you did it—to draw them away from me. I'm glad I was able to repay you a little, with this war ended. Your dad knows the whole truth now—and Bob is safe, too, down in the kiva."

"They weren't sure to kill me," she smiled. "They didn't. It wasn't anything compared with what you have done for us. Here's Daddy."

Lew Pardmore was dismounting, and with him were Herb Langre, Treek, Ash and Carl Sands, in addition to his regular party. "Got him," murmured Pardmore, eyes roving to the dark figure of Tomlinson in the sand. He went to Jean, kissed her and hugged her hungrily, joyfully. "You ain't hurt, honey-girl?"

"Not a bit, Daddy—thanks to Mr. Dory."

Now that a horse was available, Menlo borrowed a Wagon Rod mount, bent on the last phase of the outlaw roundup without which his mission would be a failure. "Tevizon's skipped," he informed the riders

"I can pick up his tracks easy enough, and I aim to stay with them if they lead to Texas."

"Man, you ain't had a wink of sleep all last night," Pardmore protested. "Better rest up a day or so, and then—"

"No. I'll send back your horse later."

"Reckon you'll have trouble forgivin' me," the Wagon Rod owner said. "We was patrolin' all along down by them old cliff dwellin's—didn't hardly expect you up here. How'd you get out of that hole? The cave lead away up here?"

Menlo told him of the kiva. "Reminds me, you'd better send a couple of riders to the Tombs entrance and go in with Pete York and get Baizee—I think he's only shot in the hip." He told of the fate of the others.

"There comes the rest of the boys!" exclaimed Pardmore. "Well, Menlo, here's Herb and Jim and Panther—they got the herd, thanks to you, and toted back five theives, includin' Gruber. Where's them other snakes, Baca and LaMotte?"

The Texan did not know about Baca for certain, but he told about the end of LaMotte, while he adjusted cinches and mounted for the man-hunt for Tevizon.

"Sho'," said Pardmore suddenly. "I forgot to mention Carl, speakin' of them rustlers. He done a mite in corralin' 'em, too!"

Menlo looked around for Bob Wilcox, wondering why he hadn't joined his fiancée.

Carl Sands stroked his beard. "Not bein' given to tootin' my own horn, I won't say what share I took in the caper," he affirmed solemnly. "I told Lew every word you instructed me to, Menlo, includin' how you and Miss Jean and Bob was at my place before yuh sent Jean and Bob—and all the rest—though I ain't givin' to talkin' much—close-mouthed, the boys calls me. When it comes to a range war, I'm neutral; but if it's a showdown, I don't mind statin' I'm always ready to tote a gun for the Wagon Rod—"

"There's Bill Wilcox!" exclaimed Jean, as the little group climbed the rise and broke toward them.

Carl Sands wagged his head. "But not sayin' I ain't as loyal a friend as Bill's got, if it comes to a test between the outfits," he added hastily. "And Lew knows I'd never—"

The Texan rode the short distance to the *estufa* hole of the kiva, where last he had seen Bob Wilcox climbing the ladder behind him. When he dismounted and looked down, calling the young cowman's name, his eyes, accustomed to the sun glare, were unable to penetrate the gloom of the interior at first. His face froze abruptly as he noted the peculiar position of the pole ladder. It had been torn away from its position at the opening, jerked sideways and thrown against the east wall, though still upright. Someone down in that cavern had

slipped up while Bob was about to climb out and had given the timber a wrench that must have knocked the Bar W youth off the pole.

Summoning the riders of both outfits, Menlo Dory paid out the rope from the saddle of the borrowed horse, attaching it to the horn, and let himself down the rope far enough to reach the ladder in its altered position. In a moment others were entering the cavern with him.

Again the Texan called Bob Wilcox's name; again there was no response.

Menlo turned to the rangemen behind him. "Something's happened to Bob." His voice was thin and far away, taut with made fury. "I was a prize fool not to be sure this hellhole was clear. Cock your pistols, and we'll go clean through this old runway and find the answer."

Slowly the little band of searchers advanced, Menlo Dory in the lead. In utter darkness they traveled, feeling the walls of the passage, ears alert for sound.

The search was futile. After reaching the adobe entrance to the old robber lair connecting the Indian ruins, they went back, now lighting the interior with creosote bush torches, going into several side-chambers. Bob Wilcox was no longer in the underground, unless in a chamber so cleverly concealed that they could not find it. Baca and Monk Baizee, both wounded, had also disappeared.

Before the sun went down that day Menlo Dory tracked the horse on which Tevizon had fled the scene, following the hoofprints far enough to make sure the desperado did not circle back and re-enter the underground den by some other secret passage. Satisfied Tevizon had headed for the Santa Isabel hills, he returned to Hidden Valley and the distraught Bill Wilcox riders. Joined by Pardmore's men in what would have been a love feast with the end of the range war, the Bar W cowboys had thrown a cordon all about 'Dobe Tombs and the kiva, prepared to camp there for the night, while a few men in relays continued the search underground with torches. Fearing to let Jean out of his sight, Lew Pardmore fixed up a grass bed for her in the watch-camp.

Bill Wilcox's voice shook as he asked: "You reckon they've killed him, Menlo?"

"No. If they had, we'd've found the body. They'd have nothing to gain taking it with them or even hiding it. Some of Tevizon's crew have got him, and we'll probably hear from them in the morning. They'll demand more money or cattle. It'll be easier if they don't get word to Skag Garone. I reckon we've just got to wait, in spite of the big haul Tevizon just made."

Even the man-hunt for Tevizon had to be delayed, Menlo realized, until Bob Wilcox was found. In tears over Bob's plight, Jean Pard-

more was given the Texan's pledge he would lay down his life if need be to bring back the young cowman of Bar W. He was able to catch up on some of his sleep that night. In the morning early a Zuni Indian rode into camp. He bore a penciled note scribbled on brown wrapping paper:

Bill Wilcox: You and Pardmore let that jayckass Dory talk you out of delivering the ransom money. Now it's Dory's life against Bob's. Since that hombre is hellbent on sticking his nose into trouble, here's his chance. Send the money with Dory to deliver to me in person in Ranger today—Tuesday. I'll be there to gun him when he does it. Then I'll send Bob back. If anybody else horns in or tries to grab me, Baca has got orders to kill Bob by sundown if I don't show up.

Tev.

"What's he mean—not getting the money?" asked the Texan. "You sent it down, didn't you?"

Bill Wilcox shook his head. "It was a dummy roll we both made up for them, outside bills twenties, insides all dollar denomination. We had the full amount in case they noticed it and made a holler." His voice cracked. "I guess we made a mighty mistake, not knowin' the devil we was dealin' with."

JEAN PARDMORE paled when, looking over the message with Menlo Dory, she raised agonized eyes to the Texan. "It's revenge he wants even more than the money," she said.

Lew Pardmore and Bill Wilcox walked away together and conversed in low, grim tones, their faces harsh. No longer foes, these two were combining their forces now in the mutual effort to save young Wilcox's life and run the desperado down.

Menlo Dory turned to the mahogany-skinned Zuni. "Where did you get that paper?"

The Indian raised a hand, indicating the direction of the Chavez trading post. "Man hand it to me. He say I come here. He give me dollar to bring the paper." He turned the coin in his hand.

Carl Sands examined the note. "Wrote it on my wrappin' paper," he muttered. "Must of busted into my store last night to get it."

"When did he give it to you?" Menlo asked the Zuni.

"Before sunup," grunted the Indian. "I come to the post with turquoise to pawn. He there, nobody else." To further questioning he said he came to the post so early in order to meet the six o'clock train and offer some of his pottery for sale to the tourists. The Texan was convinced the Indian was an innocent party to the extortion plot.

"I doubt Tevizon will go into town," grated Bill Wilcox. "He'd be a fool, openin' himself to capture with the whole country on the lookout for him."

The Texan shook his head. "You never can tell about a man like him. He's dangerous and resourceful, and he knows it. A criminal like him hates to admit defeat. He'll do the reckless thing to gratify his own ego and garner glory, as he sees it. Every peace officer has had experience with his kind. So I wouldn't be surprised if he'd go into Ranger today, taking a chance on getting the ransom and settling the score with me. The only thing to do is to play his game, at least half-way."

"You mean—take in the money?"

"Yeah, and follow his orders. Otherwise he's certain to carry out his threat against Bob."

"Good Lord, Menlo—it's a plain deadfall for you!" groaned the Ear W boss. "I wouldn't ask you to step into that trap even to save Bob. He'll likely kill you and then not turn Bob over. If he don't succeed in takin' yore life, it's certain he won't release Bob."

Jean Pardmore had approached. The words of Wilcox had not been lost on her. Her hand trembled as she touched Menlo's arm. "There must be some other way than that. Why couldn't all the riders go into

Ranger and capture Tevizon, then make him reveal where Baca is holding Bob?"

"Might torture it out of him," Bill Wilcox offered grimly.

"He'd probably clear out if he saw the bunch coming," Menlo Dory affirmed. "Then it would be too late. No, there's only one other chance. Send out the riders in all directions, some of them going to that shack in the canyon, some to the trading post, some staying here near the kiva and down at the Tombs. That way we might find Bob. Meanwhile that ransom money you held out on him yesterday better be handed over to me to take up negotiations." The Texan's eyes glittered. "Needless to say, I won't turn over the money unless Bob can't be saved any other way."

Bill Wilcox walked nervously to and fro. "I don't like it. It looks to me like a murder plot, plain and simple. The money's nothing, if it'll spare Bob's life." He turned to the Indian. "He didn't say what time he'd be in town, did he?"

The Zuni shook his head, apparently puzzled about the entire affair. It developed he could not read and knew nothing of what the note contained.

"Come with me, Bill." Menlo Dory and the cattleman mounted. After leaving directions for locating the cabin in the canyon so that Wagon Rod riders could go there on the hunt for Bob, the Texan started north with the Bar W owner.

He led the way toward the trading post, following the tracks of Tevizon's horse the previous evening. "I figured he'd hit for the hills, but he must have circled back, from the way things have turned out," the Texan explained.

The tracks were still distinct in the loamy, sandy soil almost to the trading post. Here Tevizon had crossed rocky ground and it took some time to decipher the mark. At last Menlo found the trail. "Right here he cut left." Turning, the Texan followed slowly along the hoof-print sign. "Bent back—the other side of that kiva ridge!" he muttered.

Half an hour later he and Bill Wilcox dismounted beside a much-marked slope. Bootprints joined the hoof-sign here. Menlo Dory's practiced eye appraised the spot quickly. "A lot of tracks; two horses and two men on foot," he murmured. "Right here Tevizon was joined by somebody." His gaze went to a dish-shaped rock lying flat on the ground, the scaled-off granite cap of a boulder that heat and cold had loosened from the mother stone like the shell of an egg. He bent close to the print-sign.

"He crawled up here and wiped out the footprints with his hands," the Texan said, lifting the four-foot plate of granite.

"Jingoes, there a hole under it!" exclaimed Bill Wilcox.

"Big enough for a man to worm into," the Texan added. "Come on, Bill; we'll have a look!" He let himself into the hole.

The two men worked their way on an inclined floor for a dozen feet, then found themselves on level ground, the passage widening. They advanced in the darkness. Presently the Texan's boot struck water. He gripped the Bar W owner in time to prevent a drop into a pool of uncertain depth. Now he struck a match, lighting the dark waters of the grotto.

"Look, there's somethin' afloat!" Wilcox ejaculated. "Good God—it's the body of a man!" The match burned out and Menlo struck another.

Wilcox steadied himself, fearing his son was floating there in the dark pool. The Texan bent over the edge. "It's Monk Baizee." He was puzzled, and the mystery deepened when he discovered the underground passage ended at the pool; overhanging rocks shutting off further opening behind the pool.

"Tevizon went in here," he said thoughtfully. "I believe Bob was in this passage, and maybe Baca got through the other tunnel into this one, too. But this body puzzles me."

They went back, exhausting their matches to find a connecting passage to the channel leading to 'Dobe Tombs, without success. When they reached the surface they saw Carl Sands riding swiftly in their direction.

"Tevizon's just killed Pete York!" shouted the trader, reining up. "Down at the Tombs!"

Menlo and Bill Wilcox jumped their horses, turned back with Sands.

"Pete was standin' guard at the lower 'dobe shack," the trader explained as they rode. "Him and me. All at once I seen Tevizon at the door of the upper 'dobe. He opened fire and poor Pete drapped."

"You dead sure it was Tevizon?" Menlo rapped.

"Shore as I'm a white man! I seen him plain as I see you and Bill right now!"

Down at 'Dobe Tombs they found the body of Lew Pardmore's foreman, where he had died watching the lower exit of the cave. The Texan, Wilcox and Sands entered the hole in the wall with wrapped creosote bush for torches and made a thorough search in the passage of the old outlaw lair. When they returned to the surface, three of the Wagon Rod cowboys were there, much excited on discovering the body of their foreman. They had prepared to take the slain York to the ranch. They had seen nothing of Tevizon.

"Looks like Mr. Pardmore comin' back from the canyon," Bill Wilcox said, gesturing toward the hills. Riders were moving toward Hidden Valley in that direction. When they arrived, the Wagon Rod boss had news.

"No sign of anybody up there," Pardmore declared. "I doubt

Tevizon would risk takin' Bob back to that cabin. We seen an Indian squaw layin' dead near the tradin' post—looked like she'd been killed durin' the night. You see any connection, Menlo? Tevizon wouldn't be killin' a squaw, would he?"

"Where did that Zuni go?" asked the Texan quickly.

"He went back toward the post," one of the cowboys said. "Yuh think he might of done it?"

"Might be a renegade Indian, after all," the Texan affirmed slowly. "Maybe he's joined up with Tevizon." He told Pardmore about the killing of York, news of which had not yet been broken to his employer. The Wagon Rod owner walked around to where the body lay, his face working in undisguised grief. In a moment he came back.

"Menlo, I swear to kill that devil if it's the last thing I do," he rasped. "You let me handle it, includin' that ransom matter. I'm goin' into Ranger myself."

"I doubt Tevizon will be there," Bill Wilcox declared. "He's makin' his play right here, where he c'n dodge about in this cave. I feel Bob is in there somewhere. Let's make another hunt."

Once more the searching party entered the underground, five men making the trip. But they returned empty-handed.

"That Zuni said somethin' about goin' to Ranger himself," Pardmore declared. "Said Tevizon offered him another dollar to be there at noontime."

The Texan's eyes narrowed. "That dovetails in," he gritted. "He mightn't know everything, that Zuni, but Tevizon is using him. It means the killer will keep his date in Ranger and no mistake." Menlo Dory talked earnestly to Lew Pardmore about the ransom money. Bill Wilcox and the Wagon Rod owner agreed to put up half of it apiece. The Texan persuaded Pardmore to allow him to go into town with the ransom, as directed by Tevizon.

"We're dealing with a maniac," he argued. "He'll kill Bob sure if you try anything different from what he ordered. You still got that roll of money on you, Bill?"

Bill Wilcox handed it over. The Texan mounted, turned to the assembled riders. "Stay out of Ranger till it's over, one way or another. Throw a ring around the town, several miles out if you want to. If Tevizon gets clear, grab him when he leaves town. But don't kill him till you make sure Bob won't pay the price."

After inquiring about Jean and learning she had been taken back to the Wagon Rod, the Texan rode slowly toward Ranger.

WHEN he topped the last rise on the trail leading to Ranger, the Texan was surprised to see Jean riding down from a clump of cottonwoods on a neighboring hill. "I've been watching," she breathed, as she reined up her palomino beside him. "But Tevizon hasn't come."

"You here—alone?" he reproved her. He noticed she was pale and distraught, the usual rose flush gone from her cheeks, her light hazel eyes troubled. Her presence here was a complication he did not like, for her own sake.

"I couldn't stay at the ranch," she declared, nervously fingering the strap of the binoculars she carried over her shoulders. "There might be something I could do for Bob, too, and I couldn't bear to see you carry out the instructions in that note. I watched the trail, from that high point. If Tevizon had come, I intended to talk to him."

"Talk to him!" Menlo Dory stared at her. "Lucky he didn't come."

"I am not so crazy as you think. I would have demanded that he bring Bob with him before the ransom was paid, or not a dollar would he get."

"And he'd have you again," the Texan affirmed.

"No." She drew from her blouse a long skinning knife. "I would have killed him." Carefully she tucked the weapon back out of sight. "We had better go up into the cottonwoods and wait for him—both of us."

It was near noon now, and the Texan was not so sure Tevizon hadn't got into town in some round-about way. "Aanybody at all pass on this trail while you waited?" he asked her.

"Nobody but that Zuni and his squaw on their Indian ponies loaded down with pottery. And from that hill I could look all around the town. A couple of cowboys rode in from the south, but I'm sure neither was Tevizon."

"Might have been." Menlo Dory frowned in puzzlement about Jean, wondering what to do with her, afraid to send her back to rejoin her father's party or the Wilcox riders. The outskirts of the hamlet lay close at hand. "Come along," he decided, having it in mind to leave her with Clem Chafee at the sheriff's office while he kept his rendezvous with the killer.

"If he's there, I intend to see him," the girl declared determinedly. "Do you have the money?"

"All but what he got at the Tombs," Menlo replied easily, knowing she would not "see" Tevizon if he could prevent it. They reached the end of the street. Dust funnels swirled in the roadway. Few townsmen were about, and only six or seven horses swished their tails in the shade of the cottonwoods at the general store and the Jinglebob. As

the pair neared the sheriff's office, Clem Chafee rushed out excitedly.

"He's here!" the officer gritted, alarmed eyes on Jean. "Good Lord, Menlo—why'd she come along?"

"Wanted to see you, Clem," the Texan declared. "Better lock her up a spell—till it's over," he added, half in earnest. "Now, Miss Jean, no foolin'. You go in there and wait with Clem till I have a chance to negotiate with Tevizon. Where is that party, Clem?"

"In the Jinglebob. I'd have grabbed him or died in the try if it wasn't he held aces." The acting sheriff's lips twisted viciously. "I was in the office. Had no idee he was here. All at once he stepped in on me, coverin' me with his gun. He said if I horned in, or anybody else did, Bob Wilcox wouldn't come back alive. He said he was dealin' with you, and soon as you arrived I was to watch the fun. If he didn't get the money and kill you, then Baca would shoot Bob down in the Tombs before night." Clem Chafee's mouth hardened. "Now we've got to out-figure him, Menlo, us two, or that devil will get us both and the ransom, too."

"Any ideas, Clem?"

The young lawman shook his head. "I've nigh busted my cranium tryin' to meet his ante. Bob bein' back there in the secret chamber in the Tombs makes it tough. But you'd be a plumb fool, Menlo, to try to negotiate. He's bent on murder—your life or Bob's. We've got to out-figure him."

"In the Jinglebob," murmured the Texan grimly, glancing down the street. Across from the saloon he saw the Zuni and his squaw squatted in the dirt, their colorful painted pottery set out in front of them. Less than half a dozen others were in sight during this hot noon hour. Menlo glanced at Jean. She was crying, her large eyes welling with glistening tears.

"He didn't bring Bob in with him, after all," she said chokingly. "I thought there might be a chance, if he got the money."

"Nary a chance for him to yield anything, miss," Chafee said; "leastwise not without satisfyin' his blood-lust ag'in Menlo Dory, the man he hates. So we got to figure out some other way. You come in with me, Miss Jean."

The Texan dismounted and motioned the girl down, his blue eyes somber. "You stay out of it, ma'am. It'll make it worse if you get mixed up in this."

She blinked away the tears. "I was thinking how hopeless it is, with Bob back there in the cave at the mercy of this man's whim. Poor Bob. . . ." Her voice broke. "He would have been out of it if he hadn't followed you in there to help me. And you. Why should you fall into the trap? He has everything his own way. Unless he kills you, he won't free Bob anyhow." Her lip quivered. "I won't let you do it!"

Suddenly she shot her palomino forward. She had delayed in dis-

mounting, and the Texan saw her racing down the street, riding toward the Jinglebob. Menlo jumped to his horse, but before he could overtake her she had left the saddle and was running into the saloon.

The Texan slipped from his mount at the sidewalk and burst into the Jinglebob a minute behind her, his guns drawn for Tevizon.

Jean was in the middle of the big room, glancing all about her for the terrorist. No one else was in the place except the bartender, who stood grinning with hands on the bar. "He ain't here now, ma'am," Hatch Lambert was saying. "Dunno where he could of gone to, but he ain't been in the place the last fifteen minutes."

Menlo Dory strode quickly toward the booths, looked into them one after another, then stepped into the back room and made a hurried search there. Tevizon was not about. The Texan took Jean's arm and led her to the street, while he kept his forty-five in hand and his eyes darted swiftly to right and left for sight of the killer.

"Now listen, girl. If he had been in there, don't you see what a mess you'd have made of it when I came in? He could have used you as a shield, taken the money and killed me. Let that be a lesson. Go up and stay with Clem. Ask that Indian what he wants."

The Zuni had raised his hand in a beckoning motion. Jean stepped over to him and the squaw. She returned in a moment to where the Texan was scanning doorways and windows for Tevizon.

"Here's a note!" the girl exclaimed. "From Tevizon!" Menlo Dory glanced at the paper:

*Dory: Hand the money to this Injun, then git ready to smoke.
Tev.*

Jean's hand shook as she held the note. "He must be near, watching us at this very moment!" she said in a frightened voice.

"Looks that way," he admitted grimly, drawing her back into the doorway of the saddle shop next to the Jinglebob.

"What are you going to do?" she asked, dread in her tone. "You couldn't turn over the money without some assurance about Bob. And even if you did, he would only shoot you down from his hiding place."

Menlo Dory frowned. He was thinking of those things. Also, he was concerned about Jean, here so close to the danger zone. He dared not leave her to make a hunt of nearby points of vantage, dared not take her along, or even risk sending her up the street again to the sheriff's office alone.

She laid her trembling hand on his. "I can't ask you to do this, even for Bob. It would mean your life. If that maniac doesn't kill you, he has no intention of freeing Bob. I doubt he would spare Bob even then." She smiled bravely up at the tall ex-ranger. "I must do it.

Give me the money. If I go over and give it to the Zuni, I can follow him until he delivers the ransom to Tevizon, and maybe he will spare Bob then."

Menlo Dory laughed softly. "And put yourself in his power again? No." He turned, leading her into the saddle shop. "Stay in here, and don't come out." He spoke to the old man working on a leather fender at his bench, asked him to lock the door when he went out.

"What are you going to do?" Jean cried in alarm.

"Frisk the town for the killer before I answer that note." He swung out into the street. Along the sidewalk he walked slowly, eyes roving, gun holstered but within quick reach of his hanging right hand. Into the hide house adjoining the saddle shop he strode, searched the place, then went out and crossed the street at an angle, restless gaze widely focused for sign of Skag Garone. Saloons and shops and corral opposite the Jinglebob were searched in turn, including the livery stables and the hay mow above. Tevizon was not in any building within close range of the Zuni and his squaw.

That puzzled the Texan, but he kept going, walking steadily up along the sidewalk, across again and down the other side. He did not doubt he was being watched by the hidden killer during most of this time, and yet he knew Tevizon would hardly shoot him down until he had the ransom money within his grasp. He returned to the saddle shop, which the keeper unlocked. Jean, who had been watching in breathless fear, ran to him, her blanched face hopeful. "Now—you'll let me try? Don't you see, if you fought Tevizon and even killed him it wouldn't save Bob? Besides, he wouldn't have anything to gain by me again, once he had the money anyway."

Menlo Dory smiled at her lack of understanding. To a man like Skag Garone, Jean would prove an asset in more ways than one if she fell into his power again, enabling him to bargain for a clean getaway if nothing else. Nor was the outlaw blind to the physical charms of a girl like Jean. These things needed no explanation.

"When I go up to that Zuni, Miss Jean, I want you to walk directly to the sheriff's office," he told her. "That Indian holds the key to Tevizon's whereabouts. Maybe I'll hand him the money. Anyhow, then's no time for a girl to mix things up. Promise?"

"No! no! And leave you to be killed—"

"Do what I say," he commanded, quietly but firmly. "I have a feeling I won't be killed. And its the only way to save Bob." He met her pleading eyes unflinchingly.

"Very well—if you insist."

"I do. Now—start!"

He walked into the roadway, saw that she was starting for the sheriff's office. Clem Chafee was standing up there on the sidewalk watching.

Slowly the Texan advanced upon the Zuni. The Indian rose as he approached, as did the squat little squaw who had been sitting beside the spread-out pottery. Menlo Dory's eyes flitted ceaselessly to left and right, alert for Tevizon. No gunfire greeted him. The killer was waiting for the transfer of the money, if within sight of the scene. Now the Texan pulled out the ransom roll, halting within three feet of the Zuni brave. He handed it over.

A cold, deadly laugh greeted him. "Got yuh at last!" It was the voice of Tevizon. As Menlo Dory's glance swept to the squaw, he saw the huge gun muzzle pointed from the folds of the gaudy Indian blanket straight at his head. The covering had been lowered from the face of the outlaw, revealing the sinister, repellent features of the killer.

Jean Pardmore had halted, terrified at what she saw on her glance back. With a hysterical cry she ran toward the spot. Menlo yelled at her to stop, but she did not heed.

"Now's when I c'llect," rasped Skag Garone, with a throaty laugh. "If yuh think yur kin draw ag'in' the drap, why don't yuh try it?"

Menlo Dory knew the man did not live who could take out a gun and kill the border outlaw when the latter already had his weapon pulled and leveled.

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FACING death at the hands of his executioner, Menlo Dory was remarkably calm and composed. He had faced the Grim Reaper before. The ordeal always steadied him; he had trained himself to stifle all emotion, not only of fear, but of hate and vengeance as well, knowing a cool head alone could save him if that were possible at all. Aware of the killer's nature, he had faint hope of averting the catastrophe that would leave him lifeless in the street. Yet hope is of the very essence of life itself, and in that tragic moment the Texan sought a way out while the leering desperado grinned in gloating enjoyment of his coup.

Menlo Dory stood stiffly erect, eyes on that deadly uptilted gun. At such a time the mind works swiftly. Jean had halted in horror, speechless with the stark terror of the moment. She, too, was at the outlaw's mercy now; he could have killed them both. But he would probably want to spare the girl for other designs. The Texan knew Clem Chafee was watching from up the street, but outwardly there was nothing to tell him of the drama being enacted here—the officer would only know the man and girl were talking to the Zuni and the squaw. There was no hope of aid from that quarter; it would all be over before Chafee knew what was going on. Nor was there much chance Bill Wilcox or Lew Pardmore and his men would appear on the scene in time to thwart the killer. The Texan thought of a reckless rush against the squat terrorist, but discarded such a move, knowing he could not beat a gun charge that was sure to greet such a rush.

These reflections passed in the brief period Tevizon kept him covered to torture his victim before the lethal stroke. Too, the kaleidoscope of the Texan's mind pictured what had happened leading up to his exploit. It was plain now why Jean and the rangemen had not seen the outlaw enter town. He had come disguised as the Zuni's squaw, riding an Indian pony with the brave. Doubtless the redman had been forced to take this role on pain of death, or he had not known what Tevizon was about until now. Menlo had not forgotten about the dead squaw whose body had been discovered near the trading post. The killer had taken the doeskin leggings from the body; he wore them now, in addition to the moccasins and the blanket that encased his stunted frame over his range apparel. When Tevizon had been seen by Chafee in the sheriff's office and later in the Jinglebob, he had worn only his cowboy clothes—had doubtless donned the leggings in the rear room of the saloon and, wrapping the blanket around him, stepped out to rejoin the Zuni with the pottery. The Texan spoke:

"How'll you make your getaway if you kill me, Garone?" he asked blandly.

The killer's tiny black eyes glittered with exultation. His sun-cracked lips twisted. "Have yuh said yore prayers?" The gun muzzle moved an inch outward.

"Wait! Don't shoot!" Jean had found her voice. She stepped beside the Texan. "I'll go with you, Tevizon—back into the Tombs even—if you spare this man's life!"

The outlaw grinned wolfishly. "Mebbe yo'll go anyhow—jist to git yore Bob, huh?" With his free hand he reached over and and took from the Zuni's leathery fingers the money he was still holding. "Now, Dory, git set! Where yuh want it—in the haid or in the heart?" He twisted the gun barrel slightly.

"No! no!" cried the girl. "I'll do anything you say, but don't shoot!"

"Anythin'!" sneered Tevizon.

"Anything—if you'll spare his life!" She pleaded passionately, appealed to the killer's reason, his honor and his fears, threatening him with death at the hands of the Wagon Rod, told him he could never escape with her through the ring of riders around the town, again offered herself—anything—to save the life of this man from Texas. When she realized she might as well plead with a stone, she suddenly threw herself in front of Menlo Dory, between the killer and his intended victim.

"Throw up yore hands!" stormed Tevizon. "Or I'll kill the filly like a pup!"

With the girl partly shielding him from the outlaw's gun, Menlo Dory was on the verge of risking the draw, hoping to down the assassin before he could find the mark he sought. But he knew Skag Garone would kill Jean unless he raised his hands. He lifted them.

"Stand clear, ma'am," he said in even tones. "I reckon there's one request a dying man can make, like is done in prison before the last march to the gallows. Allow me to light a smoke before you fire, Garone?"

Jean had stepped aside, fascinated by the calm assurance in the Texan's tone. The killer snarled assent to the last request. "But make it snappy!" His black eyes filmed over, intently watching Menlo Dory. Lowering his hands, still facing the uplifted forty-five of the terrorist, the Texan plucked his bag of Durham from his vest pocket, leisurely drew out the brown papers and proceeded to roll his smoke, sifting the makings liberally into the paper after pulling the string tag shut with his teeth.

The fine-cut tobacco filtered down over the paper, much of it spilling through his fingers, but not from nervousness. He was making a fat smoke.

"I'm watchin' yuh close!" said Tevizon—"in case yuh figger to go fer yore gun when yuh reach fer a match. Wait, damn yuh! Take his pistol, gal, and lay it behind him, or I'll drill him instanter—now!"

The girl wavered, but Menlo Dory nodded to her to comply. She lifted out the weapon, hesitated as though debating whether to try to use it on the killer.

"Lay it down, ma'am," instructed the Texan, knowing her inexperienced fingers could not handle such a weight effectively and the attempt would bring death to one of them or both.

Now Menlo Dory resumed the making of the cigarette, closing the edges over the fine-cut. He lifted the smoke to his lips. As he was about to lick the paper, his lips puckered an instant. Suddenly he forced a blast of quick, powerful breath into the paper cone. A yellowish cloud of the nicotine dust shot forth into the desperado's eyes.

Skag Garone blinked, cursed, momentarily blinded by the stinging, burning tobacco powder, stabbing at his eyes with his one free hand, the other going part way up in the involuntary movement. With a furious oath he pressed the trigger, but Menlo Dory had already stooped and rush upon him. Striking the wrist that held the gun with a flashing right, knocking the weapon clear, he swung to the other's jaw, sent him sprawling and leaped upon the groaning, groveling runt in the dirt of the road, seizing the ransom money he had tucked away. Now he got up and waited for Tevizon to rise.

Jean was laughing hysterically, beside herself with joy. "It's all over now," the Texan said soothingly. "I tried out that trick down on the border once. A killer got his gun on me and it looked like angels and harps, sure enough. With a whiff of my nicotine dust in his eyes he quit cold, begging. This Garone was tougher stuff, but he's through now. Lucky I didn't have to kill him, for the sake of Bob."

The sound of the wild shots of Tevizon had brought Clem Chafee on the run, with several townsmen. By this time the desperado was crawling to his feet, kicking the squaw blanket from him. He straightened up slowly, a ridiculous figure in his cowboy garb and the Indian moccasins and leggings, all the fight taken out of him. Menlo made sure he had no second gun in hiding, and asked the sheriff to bring the horses. When he questioned the Zuni brave and mentioned the murdered squaw, the Indian began to jabber menacingly, and demanded the privilege of knifing the killer to the heart. The slain squaw was the Zuni's sister. Menlo Dory had other plans, and when Chafee brought the horses, the ride to the Tombs began, the prisoner riding the Indian pony.

Out on the mesa beyond Ranger the riders of the Wagon Rod and Bar W were quick to join the little procession, emitting a prolonged cowboy yell when they saw Tevizon slumped in the saddle, the captive of Menlo Dory at last. The Texan returned the ransom money to the rightful owners. Lew Pardmore and Bill Wilcox were no longer enemies; they had cleared up the last of their misunderstandings, agreed on a peaceable settlement of the dispute over the boundary, united in

their determination to pool their resources to find Bob Wilcox. It was not until they had reached the draw in Hidden Valley that Menlo Dory addressed his captive:

"It's your life against Bob Wilcox's now, Garone. What way is nearest to that secret chamber—through the adobe or that upper cave?"

"Yuh turn me loose if I take yuh to him, huh?" the desperado demanded sullenly.

"No, you go back to Texas to stand trial. But you die in a hurry if you don't come through."

Skag Garone showed his jagged teeth. "Lower end is as good as any. Take yore pick."

At the Tombs the Texan dismounted with his prisoner. He asked Bill Wilcox to send a force of riders to the kiva exit of the grotto, keeping the remainder at the adobes. Pardmore he instructed to send six men to the rock slab entrance leading out of the cave into the little ravine. While he tied greasewood and creosote brush into compact heads for torches, Jean helped him.

"May I go with you, and hold the light?" she asked anxiously. "Somehow I feel he will lead you into another trap in that cave."

"All the more reason why you shouldn't go along, then," the Texan said with a smile.

Clem Chafee insisted on accompanying the ex-ranger underground, and Menlo did not seriously object. In a few minutes the two men entered the adobe hole with the prisoner.

Unarmed, Garone was not a serious menace now, and as he was followed closely into the cave, he glided ahead in his soft moccasins, his every move revealed by the flares that lighted the rock walls of the passage. At last he halted at the edge of the yawning chasm around which Menlo had traveled on that first occasion to the kiva. The desperado laughed in bitter mockery. Suddenly he leaped over the edge of the black hole, out of sight.

There was a huge splash of water from below, the spray jumping up into the faces of the lawman and Menlo. Quickly the torches were thrust over the edge, revealing the dark pool below, now eddying in circles where the outlaw had disappeared. The eerie flares lighted the dank walls of rock around the great cavern well.

"Committed suicide!" gasped Clem Chafee. "Outwitted us in the end—and no Bob Wilcox!"

El Montero, the Man-Hunter, stood stone still, his eyes bleak in the glare of the dancing light. He did not believe Skag Garone was the kind to end his own life. "Go back and get a rope, Clem, in case I'll need it to get back up if my guess is wrong," he said grimly, stripping off his vest.

"What yuh figure to do?" barked the astonished lawman. "Not goin' down into that pool—you'd never get out—"

Menlo Dory dived down into the abyss.

He struck the water head first, went under and gradually rose to the surface. Swimming the Rio Grande on the trail of border smugglers and rustlers had taught him to handle himself in the water. He began to think the desperado had committed suicide, after all, when his boot brushed against an unyielding tangle of something that felt like rope. All was dark now; Clem Chafee had rushed back to get a reata. With his hands the Texan touched the rope in water. Quickly he went under, grasping the heavy line and followed it through the pool. It led down for perhaps ten feet, he judged, then began to rise nearer the surface. Swimming with the heavy hemp as guide, Menlo Dory abruptly came to the top of the watery hole.

As his head broke water and his eyes cleared he was astonished to find himself in broad daylight.

He was in an outside pool facing a rocky cliff that rose high from the water. A brush-lined bowl was facing the precipice, cattle trails leading to the edge of the waterhole. In Texas they called such pools "rock tanks," natural reservoirs that were a blessing to the cow country.

"Figured that rope had been put in the water for a purpose," he murmured, his judgment that it was a guide to the outlaws verified. He realized instantly now the secret of Tevizon's previous escapes. While the main cavern led to the kiva, an offshoot had its exit at the granite-slab hole in the ravine, and this was the third means of egress. A natural rock partition, part of the underhanging cliff, hid its connection with the main cavern, extending several feet under the surface of inner and outer pools. Part of the same underslung granite barrier separated the slab exit from the other two channels, explaining why Menlo had come to an apparent end in the upper grotto. Monk Bai-zee's body floating there also stood reasonably explained. Wounded, he had probably drowned trying to swim under the rock partition.

But where was Skag Garone, and where was Bob Wilcox? The Texan climbed out of the waterhole, his clothes dripping, tilted his holster, and took his forty-five in hand.

It was fortunate he did so. "There's that Tehanno!" he heard a sibilant voice from above. "He follered yuh out, Tev! Quick, take the rifle!" It must have been Baca.

At that instant Menlo Dory sighted a peculiar metal glint behind a clump of scrub oak on the cliff. His eyes focused on the outthrust barrel of a rifle being shoved swiftly down upon him. The Texan's Colt swung like a streak of light and exploded.

He had glimpsed behind the long gun the deadly eyes of Skag Garone. Now the swarthy face rose up, the flat-nosed killer clutching the brush with his hands, the rifle falling through the shrub. Slowly the

head and shoulders of the desperado sagged forward from the ledge on which he had been hiding, his vainly clutching arms reaching out helplessly. Suddenly he fell face forward through the scrub oak, the body limp and quivering, turning over and over as it dropped through the brush into space until it hit the waterhole with a resounding splash. The pool closed over the disappearing outlaw, and Tevizon of the Wagon Rod, Skag Garone of the border, was no more.

"Don't shoot, Dory!" croaked the half-breed Baca from the ledge. "I'm through!" He was standing at the edge of the straggling oak that screened his hide-out, wounded arm partly lifted, the other well overhead. Menlo Dory was traveling to the foot of the cliff, his weapon lifted. He took the winding foot trail that zigzagged up the face of the cliff and climbed rapidly, alert for further treachery.

But when he reached the shelf of rock by the scrub oak, he found Baca still standing there, unresisting. Bob Wilcox lay farther back in the recess, bound hand and foot.

"Cut him loose," the Texan rapped.

It was all over but for the climb down with the young cowman of the Bar W and the prisoner. This last-ditch hide-out of the gang was one of the swallow-nest holes of the ancient cliff-dwellings where the aborigines once retreated from maurauding tribal enemies, its opening hidden by the scrub growth. After discovery of the kiva chamber where Bob and Jean had first been held, Tevizon had driven the young ranchman here, forcing him to swim the pool from the inside. These things the Texan learned as he started on foot with Bob and Baca for the crest of the mesa above the Tombs. Here he fired three signal shots. Riders quickly streaked to the spot from the kiva, the ravine and 'Dobe Draw.

Menlo broke the news. It was relayed in turn as each new batch of riders joined the assembled rangemen, Bill Wilcox and his Bar W men, Lew Pardmore and the Wagon Rod, Carl Sands of the trading post, Jean, Handsome Herb Langre and finally Acting Sheriff Clem Chafee, who feared Menlo had been drowned in the inner pool. Bob and his father hugged and slapped each other affectionately, and Menlo Dory turned away when Jean and Bob walked together out of sight behind the cowgirl's pretty palomino horse.

"Man, we'll never be able to repay yuh," Lew Pardmore said, his large brown eyes glistening into the Texan's. "I ain't much for words, Menlo. But you saved my daughter's life—and brung peace on the range—the greatest blessing in the form of a man that ever came into Arizona." He wrung the Texan's hand. "Reckon you're stayin' permanent—on the Wagon Rod?"

"Nope, he ain't." It was Bill Wilcox, his ruddy face aglow. "He's permanent on Bar W. What you mean, Pardmore? Tryin' to start the war all over again, claimin' Menlo Dory for the Wagon Rod? Why,

him and me was rangers down in Texas together, and he aims to close out at Van Horn and pool his interests with me right here—for life.”

Menlo Dory smiled, shook his head. A heavy feeling was at his heart, a sadness that he had been fighting off in the excitement of recent events. He liked these men, would have been glad to sell out at Van Horn and remain here but for the knowledge he would have to try to forget Jean in different surroundings. “I’ll have to be hurrying right back,” he commented, and the lines of his face were taut. “Things will be kind of needing attention down in Texas, and the boys will be lonely—not counting business that is mighty pressing.” He glanced at Bob Wilcox and Jean standing in earnest conversation behind the palomino. “Fact is, I’ll try to catch this evening’s train.” He mounted the horse he had used before. “Will leave this bronc at Chavez corral,” he said. With a smile he waved a hand to all.

“Lordy—not goin’ so sudden?” blurted Bill Wilcox.

“Don’t forget that reward, Menlo!” called out Clem Chafee, gesturing farewell.

The Texan turned to Lew Pardmore. “Give my best to Jean for her future happiness. *Adios* all.” He rode.

He never had known the agony of a breaking heart until now. Riding into sure death was easier than this. With an effort he steeled his body against racking sobs that shook him. He knew he would always love Jean, cherish her every kind word and gesture, live over and over the scenes on his lonely watch on the Texas prairie through the years.

He heard clipping hoofs behind a rise. When he glanced back he saw Lew Pardmore’s daughter on the palomino. To say good-bye to her face to face would be hard—he had hoped to spare himself the ordeal. She came up quickly.

“Don’t you mean to stay—at all?” she asked. “I was hoping you would.” Here cheeks flushed deeply.

“No,” he said. “I’ve got to hurry home.”

“You know,” she faltered, “I heard you say something about me in your sleep one night when I was nursing you.” Her lip quivered. “Perhaps it was only a dream that really didn’t mean anything.”

“What, Miss Jean?”

“It was nothing—or you wouldn’t be going now.”

The eyes of Menlo Dory wavered. “When I get back home, I’ll sure send along a present for you and Bob,” he said awkwardly. “You tell Bob to drop me a line when the date’s set—”

“Oh, Menlo—don’t say that. I couldn’t marry Bob now, loving someone else.” Dots of moisture surged in her clear eyes. “I told Bob about it back there in the kiva when we were together. He understands.”

The Texan’s heart missed a beat. “What was it I said in my dream, Jean?” he asked eagerly, drawing his mount closer.

"You said you loved me."

He took her into his arms, across saddles. For a long moment he held her, kissed her flushed cheeks, her firm white neck, her ready, eager lips.

"There's Handsome Herb coming!" she said, struggling free. She laughed happily. "You will stay a little while, say a week or two, before going back to Van Horn, won't you?"

"Before *we* go back?"

"Yes.

"Yes!"

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