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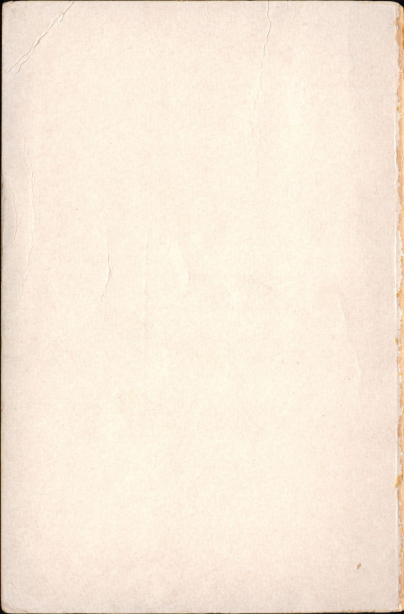
It Was Fight, Fight Every Mile!

SOUTH TO SANTA FÉ

An ACE
Original
by

**GEORGE
KILRAIN**





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**GOLD—WAITING FOR THE FIRST MAN
WITH GUTS ENOUGH TO TAKE IT!**

Only a single frightened girl knew where that fabulous gold strike was—but a dozen desperate gun-fighters knew she knew. The trail led South to Santa Fé, through the bands of warring Indians, through the scorching desert, through the bullets of night-riders and the poison fangs of Badlands snakes.

Flint Raynor wanted no part of the yellow ore, and to him fell the fate of standing between this girl and the pitiless guns of the fortune-hunters. Beside him was the powerful arm of Preacher Davis, whose passports to the untamed frontier were the Bible and the Colt. And because these two alone blocked the road to that gold cache, they were marked men, targets for every desperado's triggers.

SOUTH TO SANTA FÉ is an exceptional story of the Old Frontier and the grim men who set out to tame it. It's an ACE Original.

*Turn this book over for
second complete novel.*

CAST OF CHARACTERS

FLINT RAYNOR

He came from the mountains of Kentucky to hitch his wagon to the wild fortunes of a new frontier.

PREACHER DAVIS

He put his faith in two things—the Word of God and a steady finger on the trigger.

GEORGE SLOANE

Out to trace a phantom, he was prepared to leave a trail of men's bones.

MARIA TERESA ALMAZON

A beauty who had her own private army to obey her slightest whims.

BLAZE CORCORAN

A hardcase who knew that lone wolf trails can meet and Boot Hill is every man's destination.

CARLITA FERNANDEZ

A café girl whose dancing feet led men to desert graves.

SOUTH
to
SANTA FÉ

by
George Kilrain

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JOHNNY SUNDANCE

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CHAPTER 1

IT WAS an unusual funeral procession as it moved down the main street of Westport Landing. The mourners trailing the buckboard on which the plain pine coffin rested were grinning as if the whole affair were a huge joke.

Flint Raynor, standing on the porch of the Red Devil Saloon, wiped the beer from his lips with the sleeve of his buckskin coat and said to the man on his left:

"They have a corpse in that box, friend?"

The man's grin broadened. "Best damned corpse you ever saw, Jack," he chuckled. "Both eyes shot out of his head, an' serves him right fer lookin' too long at a pretty Delaware gal."

The man shifted away through the crowd at the end of the porch. Flint's gray eyes widened. He pushed through the mob until he came to the top step of the porch. He was struck with the appearance of the big, ungainly man moving along at the head of the column, a few yards in front of the two bony, white mules pulling the buckboard. The man was in buckskin like himself, and he wore a coonskin cap. Taller than Flint's own six feet by about four inches, he was a tremendous figure of a man, weighing at least two hundred and thirty pounds. He had a brown, seamed face, a prow of a nose, and a wide, thin-lipped mouth.

The man in buckskin turned his head to look back at the grinning crowd behind the hearse. More men were falling into line, pushing each other, whispering, grinning. When the big man stared at them they sobered up immediately.

A fat man on the porch behind Flint yelled, "Give him a good send-off, Preacher."

Flint Raynor noticed the big, worn Bible carried in the man's left hand. A heavy Hawkins' rifle hung loosely in the loop of his right arm. He had a Colt gun in the belt around his thick waist, and a wicked, bone-handled Bowie knife sticking out of a sheath on his left side. His eyes were blue, the color of the prairie sky.

They were strange eyes—the eyes of a man who had seen much sorrow; they were hard eyes, too. They seemed to bore right through the joking crowd trailing behind him and wipe the silly grin from each face they touched.

"He a minister?" Flint asked a squat teamster who was nearby. The incredulity was in his voice.

"Mister," the teamster said, "you're lookin' at Preacher Davis, the best damned mountain man in this country. The Preacher has been in places no white man has ever seen. He was the first American to reach the Salt Lake; the first one to blaze the trail through the high Sierras to California. He's hunted an' trapped in Mexico an' in Canada. He was findin' paths through this country afore anyone even knew we had anything on the other side o' the Big Muddy."

"Preacher Davis," Flint repeated, and he remembered hearing tales of the fabulous Davis the day before while coming up the Missouri on the side-wheeler, John Adams. Davis was a self-ordained minister of the gospel, a law unto himself and to his God. A walking arsenal, and one of the most deadly shots in the West with rifle and short arm, he was supposed to have occasionally taken upon himself the title, "The Avenging Angel of the Lord."

Sometimes he meted out his own brand of justice when he thought that the Lord was too busy with other business to be concerned about the affairs of men along the border.

Stepping off the porch, Flint fell in line with the others, not quite sure himself why he was doing it. For him the morning had dragged in this town of wild activity. Other men were rushing around, organizing caravans and all kinds of outfits for the Santa Fe, the Oregon, and the new gold trail to California.

In the year 1850, it seemed that all men were heading West. In Kentucky, Flint had watched them going down the Ohio by the thousands, moving overland when they couldn't afford packet fare, heading for Westport and St. Joseph, jump-off towns for the overland trail.

Swept along with this restless tide, he'd reached Westport by devious methods. He'd come down the Ohio on a lumber flat-boat. He'd worked his way to St. Louis on a Mississippi River boat. He'd stoked the furnace aboard the John Adams, coming up the Missouri, and now he was still not quite sure why he had come.

The stories emanating from the California gold fields were enticing, but he'd been a hunter and a trapper in the back country of Kentucky, and he had no mind to scratch for gold. They were telling, too, of the lush Oregon country to which thousands of men were flocking because the land east of the Mississippi was becoming too crowded. Land was to be had for the asking—all the land that a man wanted—black earth, worth its weight in gold. But Flint didn't want land. At twenty-two, he still wasn't sure what he wanted:

He had hoped that he'd know when he reached the frontier, but California beckoned, Oregon beckoned. He'd heard wonderful tales of Santa Fe, and then there were the shining mountains far to the west, and he wanted to see them because they were beyond the horizon.

The funeral procession turned down a side street toward the river, and then moved along the river shacks and the wharfs toward the cemetery, a barren hillside overlooking the brown Missouri.

The hearse with the plain board coffin stopped at a rectangular hole in the ground. The coffin was lifted from the buckboard and placed on the ground beside the newly dug hole.

Preacher Davis leaned on his Hawkins' rifle, opened the Bible, fingering the tattered pages with his huge bony fingers, moistening his finger occasionally with the tip of his tongue.

He took the coonskin cap from his head and placed it on top of the coffin. The two-hundred-odd men in the assembled crowd followed suit. They'd been murmuring as the Preacher thumbed through his book, looking for the particular passages he desired. They quieted down now, waiting for the big man to speak.

Flint moved up to a small knoll in order to see better. He was about a dozen yards from Preacher Davis, when the mountain man started to read from the Bible. He had a booming voice which carried clear down to the river.

"Dust thou art, and to dust thou shalt return."

Preacher Davis' hair was as black and as long as an Indian's, and like the Indian's it was slick with bear grease. The spring morning sunshine glistened on it.

There were no other sounds now except Preacher Davis' strong, vibrant voice, and the occasional stamp of one of the mules, the rattle of harness.

Flint glanced at the coffin on the ground, and then he nudged the man nearest to him. He said softly, "Who's being buried?"

"Red Mike Dilroy," the man murmured. "Got lickered up yesterday an' killed a Delaware girl down the river when she wouldn't let him kiss her. The Preacher kind

o' looks after the poor Injuns in this town. He went down to talk to Mike—asked him to repent of his sins. Mike must o' laughed at him an' got nasty. He pulled a gun."

The man stopped talking as if that was the end of the story. He was listening to Preacher Davis again. Out of curiosity, Flint said:

"What happened?"

The man looked at him queerly, "Any man's a damn fool enough to attempt pullin' a gun on the Preacher, drunk or sober, deserves what he gets. The Preacher shot out both o' Red Mike's eyes yesterday afternoon. He's buryin' Mike this mornin'."

Flint Raynor gulped. He stared at the big man in buckskin, reading from the Bible. He was still staring when the mountain man closed the Book and started to pray, his wide face lifted to the sky, his eyes closed. Flint was probably the only man in the crowd who spotted the thin, rat-faced fellow at the edge of the mob lifting a Colt gun, lining it on Preacher Davis' broad chest.

For one brief second Flint stared at the man. Even at the distance of thirty yards he thought he could hear the click of the hammer. Preacher Davis' gaunt face was still lifted as he pleaded to his God for the departed soul of Red Mike Dilroy.

It was a hard shot to make at thirty yards with a Colt gun, because the bullet would have to pass perilously close to the Preacher's face, and Flint had always been a better man with the long Kentucky rifle than with a Colt revolver. He hesitated one instant, knowing that the Preacher was going to die if he didn't take this chance.

Sliding the gun out of the holster, Flint lifted it in one motion and fired. He saw the rat-faced man stagger backward, his head jerked up toward the sky. He was clutching at his shoulder with his left hand as he went backward, the gun slipping from his fingers.

Flint Raynor blinked as he looked into the muzzle of Preacher Davis' Colt, and into the big man's blazing blue eyes. There had been a blur of movement, but he'd scarcely seen the giant draw the gun. It was there, steady on his chest, the long-barreled weapon immovable in the Preacher's huge fist.

Flint Raynor looked at death for one long second, and then he smiled. He was holding his own gun in position, smoke curling from the muzzle. He saw the barrel of the Preacher's gun droop very slightly.

A man was yelling, "It's Abe Dilroy, Red Mike's brother. He was figuring on shootin' the Preacher!"

They had the rat-faced man up on his feet when Flint started to walk forward. Another man was yelling,

"Somebody git a rope. We'll send this gent off with his brother."

Preacher Davis stood in front of the attempted killer, his face tense. He said, quietly, "There's a steamer leaving Westport at five o'clock tomorrow morning. You be on it."

The Preacher turned around, nodding his thanks to Flint, and then he walked back to the coffin. As if nothing had happened, he finished his prayer and threw the first handful of dirt down on the coffin after it was lowered into the ground.

He walked over to Flint then, and he said, "That was mighty fine shooting, young man."

Flint smiled. "Little worried," he admitted, "that I might shoot your chin off, Preacher."

Preacher Davis' gaunt face relaxed into a smile. "I like your kind," he said. "Staying in Westport, or are you going out with the wagon trains?"

They'd started to walk down the hill back toward town, the crowd trailing behind them. Flint said, "Reckon I haven't made up my mind yet, Preacher. Kind of like to see the mountains."

"Not the gold?" the Preacher asked shrewdly.

Flint smiled. "Not the gold," he said. He'd seen the miners on the boats coming up; he'd watched and listened to them in the saloons of Westport and St. Louis. He didn't want anything to do with the gold fields and the digging of gold. The gold miner had a mark on him; it showed in his eyes; it left a stamp on his soul, and it was not a pretty thing to see.

"You're a Kentucky man," Preacher Davis told him. "I can tell by your talk. All the Kentucky men want to see the big mountains where the sun shines on the snow in July. It was like that when I crossed the Missouri thirty years ago."

"And you've seen them," Flint said.

"All of them," Davis told him, "from every angle. I've crossed them in mid-winter when the snow was thirty feet deep in the passes. I've lived among them when even the Indians went down to lower ground in the winter. It is the most beautiful country in the world."

"How about California?" Flint asked him.

"You'll see it," Preacher Davis smiled. "I can see that in your eyes. You'll have no rest. You'd better sign up with one of the wagon trains. They're all looking for likely young men who can use guns."

They were back in town now, walking past the line of saloons and gambling houses, the crowd grinning at them, nodding to the Preacher.

"You are well known in this town," Flint observed.

Preacher Davis nodded. "I am well known in every town in the West where sinful men congregate and the gospel needs to be preached. I preach it to the redman and to the white."

"You'll never preach it again to Red Mike Dilroy," Flint smiled.

The Preacher shook his head sadly. He bowed as if in deep, painful thought. They were walking past the Black

Jack gambling house when Flint saw the young man standing just outside the bat-wing doors, watching them, his left hand in his trouser pocket, the right idly twisting a gold watch chain which ran across his flower-embroidered vest. He was dressed in gray, with a high beaver hat. He wore a fine white shirt and a polka-dot cravat.

He was a handsome man, smooth-shaven, with a well-shaped mouth, fine teeth, brown eyes. Golden-brown thick hair curled beneath the beaver hat.

In a town made up largely of roustabouts, toughs, hardcases, gold miners and immigrants, this man stood alone. The young man on the porch was a gentleman, and Flint was positive he would have known this had the man worn a red flannel shirt and corduroy trousers sticking inside huge teamsters' boots.

As they walked past, the man on the porch said cheerfully, "A pleasant morning, Reverend."

Preacher Davis stopped and looked up. He nodded and said, "Young Mr. Sloane."

Sloane said jocularly, "I see you have properly buried your dead, Reverend."

Preacher Davis said sonorously, "Thy dead men shall live, together with my dead body shall they arise. Awake and sing ye that dwell in dust; for thy dew is as the dew of herbs, and the dead shall cast out the dead."

"Saith the prophet Isaiah," Mr. Sloane nodded.

Preacher Davis glanced at him sharply. "You are a remarkable young man, Mr. Sloane," he said.

"I have had upbringing," Sloane grinned. He was looking at Flint now, sizing him up, noting his height, the width of his shoulders, the Colt gun at his side.

Flint judged Sloane to be about twenty-five, and possibly even less. He was somewhat shorter than himself, lighter in the body, but he was not a frail man by any means. There was about him, as he stood on the porch,

the poised grace and strength of a cat. He stepped aside to let a drunk stagger out through the door, and he moved lightly, easily as he came down the steps to them.

He said to the Preacher, "Have you considered my proposition, Reverend?"

"I have given it some thought," Davis admitted.

"Perhaps," Sloane said, looking straight at Flint, "our friend might be interested in the enterprise."

"I should like to hear it," Flint smiled.

"Your young man shall see visions," Preacher Davis droned, "and your old men shall dream dreams."

"The prophet Joel," Mr. Sloane smiled, "or would that be Jeremiah, Reverend?"

"Joel," the Preacher said, frowning slightly at the younger man.

"Joel or Jeremiah," Sloane said easily, "here is my plan, sir. I intend to blaze a new wagon trail to California by way of Santa Fe and Mexico."

"Reckon that's round-about," Flint observed.

"I believed it can be made a hundred times more desirable and easier on the immigrants," Mr. Sloane pointed out. "Every train crossing the continent now for the California gold fields complains of the terrible *jornadas*, and the hardships that must be suffered crossing the Sierra Nevadas. I believe if a southern route can be established—one that circumvents the deserts and the high mountain barriers—we will have accomplished something for our nation."

"You are a patriotic man," Preacher Davis stated. "Most of the California-bound men give little thought to who will come behind them."

"The success of my enterprise," Sloane said, looking at Flint again, "depends upon the Reverend Davis, the only man on this continent who could guide a wagon train down into Mexico from Santa Fe, and then up into California through one of the Sonora passes."

"That country," Davis said, "is not familiar to me. I have been in Mexico, but never in the western part of Sonora."

"I have heard," Sloane said, "that the old padres used the passes, moving up from Mexico City to the Mission de Los Angeles. There must be a route, and an easier one than the Overland Trail." He went on glibly, "From Westport to Santa Fe is a well-marked, safe trail, traveled by thousands every year. There are no mountains to be crossed, and no terribly bad deserts."

"I have been to Chihuahua," Preacher Davis said, "below Santa Fe. No man to my knowledge has ever struck west and south of Santa Fe. The Indians call it very bad country."

"We will follow the Rio Grande," Sloane said, "to the Mexican Border. After that I will depend upon your good judgment, Reverend." He looked at Flint steadily. "Does my plan appeal to you, my friend?" he asked.

"Reckon I'd like to see that country," Flint said.

Sloane slapped his back jovially. "We are making up a party of about fifty men," he laughed. "I now have forty-five lined up. By nightfall I expect to have the full quota, and we can leave with the first caravan bound for Santa Fe."

Preacher Davis looked at Flint, scratched his jaw, and then said, "I will consent to guide your party, Mr. Sloane, and may God go with us."

Flint glanced at the mountain man, and he had the feeling that Davis did not particularly want to go on this trip, but that he was going along because he thought he owed something to the man who had just saved his life.

"The name," the handsome Easterner grinned, "is George Sloane from New York City." He held out his hand. It was smooth, uncalloused, and yet very strong.

"Flint Raynor," Flint said, "Boone Licks, Kentucky."

"We will have our first meeting tonight," Sloane said. "I have already rented the back room of the Blue Eagle Saloon. You shall hear the plans in detail then. I believe we can leave Westport in three or four days."

"You have no wagons," Preacher Davis pointed out, "and no supplies."

"We'll need neither," Sloane said airily, "until we reach Santa Fe. Our party will align itself with the various caravans headed for Santa Fe. All of them are looking for likely men to accompany them as guards or teamsters. At Santa Fe we can purchase ten wagons for practically nothing. Most of the traders are glad to sell after they've made the trip and return to Westport with pack trains. We can purchase supplies in the same way."

Preacher Davis rubbed his jaw thoughtfully. He said slowly, "Every king going to war with his neighbor considereth first the cost."

"There will be precious little cost to this trip," Sloane chuckled. He looked at Flint and he added, "For that reason I am able to acquire the services of men like Mr. Raynor."

"And many others," Davis murmured, "who may not be of such character."

"I can see a well-marked wagon route from Westport Landing to California," George Sloane was saying enthusiastically, "a road which a grandmother can travel with her grandchildren. It will be far south of the deserts and the warlike Indian tribes. It will stretch down around the tip of the high Sierras. There will be no dry *jornadas*, no mountain passes such as we have on the Overland Trail."

"The children of Israel," Preacher Davis said, "wandered forty years in the wilderness."

"We shall be in California," Sloane said confidently, "before the first train arrives over the regular route." He

shook Flint's hand again, and he said, "See you tonight in the Blue Eagle."

Walking down the street alongside Preacher Davis, Flint said quietly, "You don't think too much of Sloane's plan, Preacher."

The mountain man smiled at him. "You are undoubtedly aware of the type of men Mr. Sloane will have with him," he said. "None of the men with money or background would risk traveling through an unknown country if they could reach their destination over a well-established route."

"Sloane spoke of the dangers on the Overland Trail," Flint observed.

The Preacher shook his head. "There were dangers five and ten years ago," he stated. "Now, the route is well marked. This spring on the Overland Trail to California you will see lines of wagons stretching as far as the eye can see, thousands of them, dozens and dozens of separate caravans, sustaining one another. There is no Indian body in the West which will molest such a force."

"Then why is George Sloane risking his own life to open a new route?" Flint asked curiously.

"Mr. Sloane is a strange young man," Preacher Davis murmured, "and he has the ability to draw other men to him."

"Are you going on this trip," Flint asked quietly, "because you feel you owe it to me?"

Preacher Davis shrugged his immense shoulders. "Perhaps," he said, "I, too, would like to see this new country." He smiled. "I am a curious man."

CHAPTER 2

AT FOUR O'CLOCK in the afternoon a boat whistle started to shriek alternately. A man yelled:

"River Belle comin' in, boys!"

Going through the town, seeing the sights, Flint Raynor turned down a side street, moving with the crowd which was headed for the water front. Coming up river himself, he'd heard stories of the fabulous River Belle, biggest packet on the Mississippi, fastest river boat afloat. She was coming in to Westport dock now, her whistle screaming, huge sternwheel churning the yellow water.

Sitting on a barrel on the wharf, Flint watched her maneuver out in mid-river, bells clanging as she worked in with the current. She was spotless white with gold trim, twin smokestacks, white wood smoke pouring from them. Her hurricane and texas decks were black with people.

Up in the glass-enclosed pilot house the pilot stood behind his huge wheel, reaching up now and then to pull a bell cord, unerringly sliding the big packet in between two other boats tied to the wharf.

Hawser lines were cast ashore and many hands caught them, lashing them around the stanchions. Flint Raynor smoked his pipe and watched the roustabouts run the gangplank ashore.

There was a motley crowd along the dock: toughs from the saloons; Indians in cast-off white men's clothing, some of them badly drunk. There were also Santa Fe traders in their black frock coats, ready to check their cargoes when they came off the packet.

Wagons were rolling in from all directions now, clattering the side streets, drivers cursing, lashing out with their whips. With the gangplank down, the passengers swarmed ashore, and Flint watched them, seeing the excitement in their eyes. There were many Easterners among them, pale-faced men with the gold lust in their eyes, already clamoring for passage to California.

There were emigrants too, jammed on the main deck with their heavy Conestoga wagons and their endless supplies, watching quietly, looking for homes while the others were looking for gold.

Flint got up and walked along the dock, examining the packet, admiring the gingerbread work, the beautifully panelled salon which he could see through an open doorway.

The roustabouts had another plank down to discharge cargo, and they were swinging back and forth carrying huge loads. Flint stared up at the decks, up to the big texas deck, and he looked straight into the face of a girl who was looking down at him. She was standing just behind a gingerbread railing.

She was dressed in green satin, with a bonnet of deep green velvet, and a white cashmere shawl. Her hair under the bonnet was black and her skin brown, almost like the skin of a Mexican girl, but her eyes were blue. She looked straight at Flint for one moment, and then she looked away.

Flint Raynor was conscious of the fact that he had never seen a more beautiful woman. For the first time he noticed the man standing with her—definitely Mexican or Spanish—slim, brown-skinned, a brief black mustache,

brown eyes. He was smoking a long, slim Mexican *cigarillo* as he watched the scene below with cool interest.

The Mexican was standing a few feet behind the girl in green, giving Flint the impression that he was not her traveling companion, but an attendant of some kind. When she spoke to him over her shoulder, he stepped forward, murmured something, and then drew back again.

Flint knocked the ashes from his pipe and put the pipe in his shirt pocket. Other men had seen the girl, too, and were staring up at her. A half-dozen toughs lounging near the gangplank were pointing her out. A huge, brown-whiskered man with a bullet-shaped head, stood in their midst. He wore a red-flannel shirt and the high boots of the teamster. He was three-quarters drunk, staggering a little as he stood with the others. When he saw the girl in green he turned and stared up at her, mouth open.

There were other women on the packet, but they were mostly emigrants in simple clothes and bonnets. They were as different from this girl as a common stone is to a diamond.

As she strolled along the deck toward one of the mahogany staircases, the drunken teamster turned slowly to watch her. It was as if he were watching an apparition. Flint, contemplating walking back to the main street, hesitated now. The toughs were congregated near the gangplank, greeting the passengers with insulting remarks as they came off the packet. He had the feeling that there was going to be trouble when the girl in green came down the plank.

He wondered vaguely where she was going, what she was doing in this sprawling frontier town, jump-off spot for the Santa Fe and California trails. Genteel women did not come to Westport. They went to California around

the Horn, sailing on luxurious packet ships. Very few women went to Santa Fe.

He saw her coming down the stairs to the main deck now, walking slightly ahead of the Mexican attendant. The drunken teamster saw her coming, too, and he edged up closer to the rail.

Flint moved over that way, rubbing his hands on his buckskin breeches. He stood a few feet behind the toughs as the last of the passengers came down the plank.

The girl in green had stopped for a few moments to talk with the packet captain, and now she was coming forward again, the Mexican slightly behind her. Flint saw her eye the men at the end of the plank. A frown slid across her face, but she kept coming.

One of the men near Flint whispered, "Queen o' the river. Best damned looker I ever seen in this town."

The bewhiskered drunk, only half-conscious of what he was doing, moved around until he was standing directly in front of the gangplank, blocking the exit. He stood there, gaping, lower jaw sagging.

The girl stopped a dozen feet in front of him, and then the Mexican attendant slid around her, moving with cat-like quickness. He went down the plank, and Flint saw him say something to the drunk. He spoke quietly, and none of it was discernible to Flint only a short distance away.

The bullet-headed drunk did not even listen to him. He was looking past the Mexican, that same stupid expression on his face, and then he reached out, grabbed the slim Mexican by the waist, and hurled him aside, knocking him in among the grinning toughs.

One of them caught him, spun him around, and whirled him still farther back among the crowd. Flint Raynor caught a glimpse of his face, the lips tight with rage, pale underneath the swarthy skin. He was trying to yank something out of his coat, but his arms were pinioned.

The big teamster had started to walk up the plank when Flint broke through the crowd and followed him. He grabbed the drunk by the collar, yanked him back, and whirled him down the plank again.

Three men went down when the heavy drunk tumbled into them. A man in the crowd howled gleefully: "Fight!"

The teamster got up. His small, animal eyes were blazing with anger. He spat on his hands, and then Flint whirled down the gangplank, left his feet in a flying dive, and rammed the drunk with his head. He'd had his fights before on the frontier, and he knew that the best fight was the one over quickly.

The drunk gasped as he went down, bent over double. He cuffed at Flint's head with a big paw as Flint rolled off, jumping lightly to his feet. The teamster remained on his hands and knees for a moment, panting for breath. Then he got up, walking in like a bear, huge hands extended.

Flint hit him on the mouth with his right fist, splitting the lips, sending the blood gushing down his chin. He hit again and again, but the big teamster would not take a backward step, and the blows seemed to have no effect other than to bring blood. His nose bled and his right cheek oozed from a deep cut.

The punches seemed to revive him more than anything else. He moved a little faster, still trying to get in close and catch Flint in a bear-hug. Flint maneuvered his way around on the wharf, conscious of the big crowd assembling from all directions.

He caught a glimpse once of the girl in green still standing on the gangplank, watching. He'd thought she would leave in horror at the teamster's face rapidly being reduced to a soggy mess, but she stayed.

There was a tight ring being formed around the fighters, something Flint did not like. He needed room to maneuver with a man like this. He was fast on his feet,

and he had to depend upon that speed to keep himself out of reach of the big teamster. Constantly now, as he leaped away from the man, he backed into spectators who pushed him forward again.

The teamster nearly caught him when he stumbled over a man's foot, but he righted himself and danced clear of the drunken man's charge. He kept hitting out with his fists, savage blows to the face, but the teamster absorbed them calmly and kept coming in. His face was a bloody mess; his right eye was ripped at the corner, and the blood streamed down his cheek.

He charged in low, reaching for Flint's waist, and Flint lashed down with his right hand, ripping the man's ear. He brought his knee up into the teamster's face, straightening him up, and he was getting set to drive another terrible blow into the mouth when someone pushed him from behind.

He stumbled in against the teamster, and immediately the bigger man wrapped ponderous arms around him, catching him in a bear-hug. Recognizing the danger immediately, Flint fought to get his arms free. He managed to loosen the left hand, and he beat the teamster's face with it. But the heavier man was pushing him back through the crowd toward the railing of the gangplank, driving him up against it.

He got his head up against Flint's chest, leaning his weight forward. Flint felt the tremendous pressure against his ribs. His breath started to come in gasps, and then the pain came to his spine as his back went over the rail of the gangplank. Tighter and tighter, the teamster squeezed. Spots began to appear before Flint's eyes. He wondered how much pressure his ribs could stand before they cracked.

Then the pressure suddenly stopped. The teamster's hands unclasped and the arms fell away. Gasping for breath, Flint straightened up. He saw the slim Mexican

standing behind the teamster, the point of a knife held against the back of the drunken man's neck, and a gun in the other hand. Blood was beginning to drip from the spot where the knife was held.

The Mexican said in perfect English, "I do not wish to kill you, *Señor*, but I will if you do not step to one side." He watched the crowd, the gun steady in his other hand, and he said to Frint, "*Gracios, Señor.*"

The girl in green was coming down the gangplank, passing through the crowd. She looked at Flint, the concern in her eyes, and she said, "Are you all right?"

"I'll live," Flint murmured.

"Will you come with us to the carriage?" she said. "I want to thank you."

"Reckon I'd better get out of here," Flint smiled, looking around.

The drunken teamster was standing a few paces away, big hands at his sides, the blood dripping from his face. His one eye was closed, but he stared at the girl out of the other, the same stupid expression on his face.

The Mexican was motioning for the men around to stand back. Then they moved forward, Flint bringing up the rear, and they walked along the wharf until they came to one of the waiting carriages which was taking the more wealthy passengers up to the hotel.

Flint said to the Mexican, "Glad you stepped in, mister. Reckon my back was about ready to crack."

The Mexican smiled and nodded. "I would have killed him, *Señor*," he said "if he had hurt you after you had so kindly stepped in to help me."

Flint glanced up at the girl as the Mexican helped her into the carriage. He said, "This is a rough country, ma'am."

"I am not afraid of rough countries," the girl smiled. She looked at him steadily for a moment as if trying to

read his character, and then she said, "You . . . you will not accept money for your help?"

Flint shook his head. "I will not accept money," he stated. "The hills of California are full of money I am told . . . enough money for all of us."

"You are going to California?" the girl asked him.

"It would appear," Flint observed, "that all men are going to California." He wondered where she was going. She did not intend to stay in a rough town like Westport. The California overland trail was out of the question, and that left Santa Fe.

"We are taking passage with one of the traders to Santa Fe," the girl said. "I am Maria Teresa Almazon." She nodded to the slim Mexican, "And Miguel Cordovo, my father's most trusted employee."

Miguel smiled and stepped forward, holding out his hand.

Flint said, "Flint Raynor, Boone Licks, Kentucky."

"Chasing the pot of the gold at the end of the rainbow," Maria Teresa smiled, "and I hope you find it, Mr. Raynor."

"Figured I'd have a look at the mountains," Flint murmured. "A trapper told me they hit the sky, snow on the top of them. The gold can wait."

Maria Teresa eyed him with more interest. "You are the first man I have met on this trip up river who has not talked of gold first, last and always."

"Gold cannot buy the sun shining on the mountain peaks," Flint said. "It cannot buy a cup of cold water out of a mountain spring."

"Spoken like a true poet," Miguel laughed. "You are a man after my own heart, *Señor Raynor*."

"So you are going to California," Marie Teresa said.

"Santa Fe first," Flint told her. "We are marking a new route from Santa Fe to the gold fields to avoid the big mountains."

Miguel Cordovo glanced at the girl quickly. "You are going from Santa Fe to California?" he asked dubiously. "That is an unmarked route, *Señor*. There are deserts . . . the terrible *jornadas*. Even the mountain men will not go that way."

Flint shrugged. "We shall try it," he said.

"The way of the *Americanos*," Miguel shook his head. "They will try anything . . . once."

"We may see you along the trail," Maria Teresa smiled. "Thank you again, Mr. Raynor."

Flint touched his hat and stepped back. He watched the carriage rattling up the side street, and then he followed, still feeling the pain in his sore ribs. He heard a man coming up behind him, and turning he looked into the battered face of the teamster.

The man had managed to wash some of the blood from his face, and he was still daubing at it with a dirty rag. Sanity seemed to have come back to his eyes.

He said, "So we had our little fight an' now it's over, Buck."

"That's right," Flint nodded, "and you nearly broke a half-dozen ribs for me."

The teamster grinned. "Slipperiest damned fighter I ever seen," he chuckled. "You marked me plenty, Buck. I owe you a drink for it."

Flint clapped him on the back. "Drink's on me," he said, and they headed for the nearest saloon.

"Been out here twenty-two years," the teamster stated. "Movin' them damned wagons from Westport to Santa Fe an' back again. That was the first woman I ever seen. I mean real woman. Kind o' got me mixed up."

"In this country," Flint smiled, "she'll have a lot of men mixed up, my friend."

"Saw her smilin' at you," the teamster said. "Next time you see her, tell her that Joe Flynn meant her no harm."

He had more damned drink than his fool head could stand."

"Her kind," Flint said, "won't be seeing too much of me, Joe Flynn."

"Funny world," the teamster said. "Never kin tell."

CHAPTER 3

FLINT entered the Blue Eagle Saloon at eight o'clock that night, pushing his way past the crowd of men on the porch. At this hour every saloon in Westport was jammed to the doors. Emigrants, miners, farmers camped down along the river with their wagon outfits, waiting for the mud to dry on the prairies, came into town for a last fling before heading out.

Hard-faced Santa Fe traders in black frock coats and black, flat-crowned sombreros, stood at the Westport bars, their places of business, buying supplies, mules, wagons, signing up men for the trip to the old Mexican city.

Dozens of big, bronzed teamsters pushed through the crowds swarming around the gamblers' tables and at the bars, cursing good-naturedly at each other, joshing the house girls.

Preacher Davis sat at a corner table alone, his big, worn Bible on the table before him, reading, oblivious to the noise. As Flint watched, a drunk staggered away from the bar, wandered through the crowd, a glass of

liquor in his hand, and headed for the Preacher's table.

He stumbled, nearly falling over a man's outstretched leg, and then he set the glass of liquor down on the Preacher's table with a bang, the liquor spilling from the glass, spattering the Bible.

Preacher Davis' big hand shot out, grasping the drunk by the shirt front, spinning him around, jamming him against the wall where he hung like a bug pinned against a board, mouth open, the terror coming into his blood-shot eyes.

The Preacher swept the liquor glass from the table with his left hand, and then jerked the drunk down into the chair next to him. Still holding him in an iron grip, he began to read to him from the Book.

It was fully five minutes before the Preacher released the drunk and he staggered away, dazed, heading for the bar again. Men at the nearby tables were grinning broadly as the Preacher returned to his silent reading.

A big, red-haired man with a hooked nose stood at the bar, a crowd of men around him, a black cigar in his mouth. He was watching a Mexican girl up on one of the card tables, dancing furiously to the tune of a strumming guitar. She was remarkably pretty, a coquette with black hair held in place by a large amber-colored comb. Her skin was olive-colored, lips bright red, her eyes black, glistening as she danced, the red shoes clicking on the wood of the table top.

The group of men around the table tossed silver and gold coins on the table, encouraging her, laughing, calling her by name—Carlita. Flint Raynor watched the red-haired man with the hooked nose who was looking intently at the girl. He thought there was something in his manner that was not quite right.

There was a peculiar expression in the red-head's greenish eyes. It was not a response to the physical attractiveness of the dancing Mexican girl. Flint had seen

men look at gold dust in Westport saloons in the same manner that the man at the bar looked at the dancer.

Moving through the crowd, Flint dropped down at the table beside Preacher Davis. The mountain man looked up at him and placed both hands on the Book. He said:

"A time to weep and a time to laugh; a time to mourn and a time to dance." He added, "She dances well."

"Who is the red-headed man at the bar?" Flint asked.

"Blaze Corcoran," Davis said, "the most dangerous man in this town, and the biggest sinner."

"A Santa Fe trader?" Flint wanted to know.

"He traffics in human souls," Preacher Davis said grimly. "He is a man to whom some day I must bring the judgment of Almighty God."

"Human souls?" Flint repeated queerly.

"The Apaches cross the Rio Grande to the rich haciendas in old Mexico," Davis explained. "They bring home many captives, small children, slaves. The Pawnees traffic with the Apaches, buying up the white captives, and then Blaze Corcoran makes his deal with the Pawnees because no white man can get near the Apaches, who are the wildest Indians in America."

"Corcoran buys up these Mexican children and captives?" Flint said. "For what purpose?"

"So that he may sell them again to their parents at a handsome profit," Preacher Davis said tersely. "The Pawnees have told me of this business in which Corcoran is engaged. He holds the captives until the rich *rancheros* pay him enormous sums of money."

"And he is an American?" Flint murmured.

"The devil," Preacher Davis said, "respects no nationality. He has his converts in every land, and Blaze Corcoran has sold his soul to the devil."

"And who is the girl on the table?" Flint wanted to know.

"*Señorita* Carlita Fernandez," Davis said. "Can a man take fire into his bosom and not be burned?"

"You jump at conclusions," Flint grinned. "You forget I'm signed to leave this town very shortly." He got up and he moved toward the bar, passing around the table on which Carlita Fernandez danced. She saw him going by, and she smiled at him.

Flint stepped up to the bar. There were two men between himself and Corcoran. Drinking up, the two men turned and left the bar. Corcoran raised a glass to his lips. He looked at Flint over the glass. He was the same height and general build, but considerably older. Flint judged him to be in his thirties. When he smiled, he revealed crooked, yellowed teeth.

Pushing the bottle toward Flint, he said, "Stranger in town?"

"Came up the river yesterday," Flint said. "This town is hell-on-wheels."

"Man your age shouldn't mind that, Corcoran grinned. "Going to California?"

"Reckon so," Flint nodded.

The interest came into Corcoran's eyes. He moved a step nearer and he said quickly.

"Now, I'm taking an outfit down to Santa Fe. If you'd like to pick up quick money. We're short night herders. . ."

A pleasant voice at Flint's elbow said softly, "I am afraid, sir, Mr. Raynor is already engaged."

Flint turned to look into George Sloane's handsome face. He was smoking a brown Mexican cheroot, and he was smiling pleasantly, but there was a glint in his brown eyes.

Blaze Corcoran moistened his thin lips. He stared at Sloane for some time in silence, and then he said, "My apologies." He stepped back.

George Sloane ordered two drinks, stepping between

Flint and Corcoran. He turned and leaned with his elbows on the bar, watching the Mexican girl up on the table. She was looking straight at him, smiling. George Sloane smiled back.

"She dances well," Flint observed.

"A talent most Mexicans possess," Sloane agreed. "Carlita dances too well."

"You know her?" Flint asked him.

"All the men of Westport know the charming Carlita Fernandez," Sloane nodded.

Flint lifted his glass when the bartender brought the drinks. He said, "To the new trail to California."

George Sloane smiled, "And to the charming Carlita," he grinned.

They drank, and Flint Raynor wondered how Carlita had anything to do with it. The idea was ridiculous, but the way in which Sloane brought the girl's name into it implied that she had.

Sloane excused himself to speak to another man for a few minutes, and Flint lost track of him. He noticed that Blaze Corcoran had also departed, and that Preacher Davis had left his table.

When Carlita finished her dance, she scooped up the coins the men had tossed to her, blew kisses, and ran for one of the doorways which led to the interior of the big saloon building.

Flint watched a faro game until nearly nine o'clock, and then he looked for George Sloane. The young man didn't seem to be in the building. There were three doors leading from the bar room, one of which Carlita Fernandez had used. Another door was slightly ajar, and Flint, thinking this led to the back room where Sloane's meeting was to take place, stepped through it.

He found himself in a dimly lighted corridor instead of a large back room. Other doors opened on the corri-

dor which was lighted by two small wall lamps. One of the lamps was burning very low and gave little light.

Flint frowned, looking at the five doorways along the corridor. He was about to step back to the bar and ask directions from one of the bartenders, when he heard the muffled cry from one of the rooms at the far end.

The door was jerked open and two men came out, half dragging, half carrying the Mexican dancing girl, Carlita Fernandez. One of the men had his hand over her mouth, muffling her screams. They started to drag her toward another door at the far end of the corridor—a door which apparently led to a back alley.

Carlita was kicking the floor with her red shoes as Flint lunged after them. There was no carpet in the corridor, and they heard him coming when he was still a half-dozen yards away. One of the men released the girl, slipped his right hand inside his coat, and came out with a wicked-looking knife.

Flint increased his pace as the knife started to come out of the coat. He plunged in before the man could swing the blade. Ramming his head into the man's stomach, he drove him back along the corridor, slamming him up against the door sill on one side.

He felt the knife slash along the edge of his coat collar as he brought his head up suddenly, butting at the man's chin, and then ripping both fists into his stomach. He hit hard, savagely, bringing short cries of pain from the man's lips.

He jumped back when he heard the second man coming at him. Carlita Fernandez let out a quick cry of warning. Flint whirled, looked into a red, distorted face, murder in the eyes. He'd never seen either of these men before, but they could have been any of the thousands of toughs who roamed the street of Westport this spring season.

Desperately, Flint tried to protect himself by warding

off the knife with his left arm. He tried to get at the Colt gun in his holster, knowing then that he'd been a fool to go into this fight without the gun in his hand in the first place.

He was off balance as he leaped away from the first man, and he was in a bad position to block the knife thrust. He heard Carlita's scream again, and then the sharp report of a pistol.

The man with the knife cringed as the bullet hit him in the chest. He staggered back, the knife dropping to the floor. When he hit the floor with a sodden thump, Flint knew that he was dead.

Whirling, he looked into the face of George Sloane, standing at an opened doorway about fifteen feet away. Sloane had a Colt gun in his right hand. He was holding it very steady, his face impassive. Then he shot again, the slug missing Flint's head by a matter of inches, smashing into the wood sill of the doorway at the far end of the corridor.

Flint heard the door slam as the first man he'd struggled with plunged through into the alley. A thin smile flitted across Sloane's handsome face. He said softly, reluctantly:

"Damn it. Missed him."

Men pushed out through the door behind Sloane and stared open-mouthed. Carlita Fernandez rushed past Flint, red shoes clicking on the wood floor. She threw herself into Sloane's arms, sobbing violently. Flint looked at them and then stepped to the man on the floor. He was dead, the bullet having gone through his heart.

Sloane was saying gently, "I thought I told you to lock the door, Carlita."

The girl broke into a torrent of Spanish. Seeing Flint approach, she reached out her hand and placed it on his arm.

"The *señor* has been so brave," she murmured.

Flint reddened and Sloane's smile broadened. He said, "You'd better go to your room, Carlita." When the girl hastened away, locking the door behind her this time, he said, "This is a tough town, Mr. Raynor."

Flint looked at him, knowing there was more to it than just that. Sloane knew it, also. He took Flint's arm, steered him into the back room which was thick with tobacco smoke, and said softly:

"Now, my friend, you will notice many things on our little trip to California which you may not quite understand. Just remember this that there is much to be gained by the man who knows how to look on without being too curious."

Flint shrugged. "No concern of mine," he said. "I saw those toughs dragging the girl from the room. I stepped in."

"Like a knight-errant of old," Sloane smiled. "I scarcely know whether to be pleased or displeased with your many virtues, Mr. Raynor. Suffice it to say that I am grateful to you for saving the *señorita* from—from a fate worse than death." His voice was mocking now, "And I might add that I am not in love with the girl if your natural inclinations lead you in that direction."

"They don't," Flint said dryly. He took one of the chairs in the room, and sat with his back to the wall, tilting the chair on two legs. He took out his pipe, lighted it, and puffed thoughtfully as he watched George Sloane at the door, greet some more men as they entered.

He tried to figure Sloane out, but it was an impossible task. There were too many facets to the man's character. He was polite; he was a gentleman, but he was not an Eastern tenderfoot even though he'd admitted he'd just come out from New York. He had killed a man a few minutes before without even batting an eyelash. He had tried to kill another man, and he had not even bothered to look at the man he'd shot.

The relationship which existed between Sloane and the dancer was extremely unusual. Sloane was not the man to fall for a common dance-hall girl, but yet he was showing a strange interest in her. His explanation for the attempted abduction explained nothing. There had been a reason behind the attempt, and there was a reason for Sloane's concern about her—not a personal one.

Thinking of Carlita Fernandez for the moment, Flint remembered the ruthless Blaze Corcoran who had betrayed so intense an interest in her while she was dancing. Very suddenly he was struck with the one peculiar fact. Both Corcoran and Sloane portrayed the same intense interest in the girl, with neither one of them particularly affected by her charms!

CHAPTER 4

PREACHER DAVIS came in when there were nearly fifty men in the room at the back of the Blue Eagle. The Preacher loomed head and shoulders over the others, and Flint was struck with the lofty countenance of the man in contrast with the others. They were for the most part sly, furtive men, the kind who preferred the darkness to the light. There were hard faces, too, tough faces of men who would kill for gain and think nothing of it, the faces of men who lived off other men.

If George Sloane had deliberately gone out of his way

to select fifty of the most disreputable men in Westport he could not have made a better choice. These were men without conscience, men who had forgotten their pasts.

The Preacher took a chair next to Flint. He closed his eyes, tilted his head toward the ceiling, and waited for Sloane to begin the meeting.

Standing with his back to the door, a slim brown cigar in his mouth, the same pleasant, engaging smile on his face, Sloane spoke briefly, explaining his plans for the trip.

The men in this room wanted to reach California and the gold fields, but they lacked the cash to get there, and they were not the type honest emigrants hired to help along on the long trip. Flint got the impression that George Sloane was their Pied Piper, leading them to the end of the rainbow, making glib promises.

Talk flowed from his lips, rich talk, the kind of talk these men had never heard in their lives. He appealed to their better instincts. He told them of the thousands—men, women, and children—who would follow the trail they were going to blaze to the coast, and the debt of gratitude the nation would owe to them for finding the new route.

For one brief moment Flint Raynor thought he saw some expression of pride and honesty slide over the faces of some of the men. The others just listened woodenly, waiting for Sloane to finish. They smoked cigars until the smoke was so thick Flint could scarcely see Sloane standing by the door. The Easterner's handsome face glistened with perspiration.

Preacher Davis still sat with his eyes closed, head tilted toward the ceiling, taking in every word.

"They shall some day engrave your name in stone," George Sloane was saying, his voice ringing, "and if perhaps we must leave our bones in the wilderness, posterity will remember us with gratitude."

Flint stared at him unbelievably, and then at the

listeners. Many of them had been captured by the spell. They were leaning forward in their chairs, eyes shining, mouths open. For that moment they were transformed. They had captured a vision.

Sloane repeated the plans he'd related to Flint and the Preacher. They were to sign up with Santa Fe traders, who were always taking on men to help with the caravans, and who were not as particular as the emigrants as to the characters of the men they hired. In Santa Fe, Sloane was to make all the arrangements for the purchase of the used wagons and the supplies they would need.

Preacher Davis was to lead them down the Rio Grande into Mexico, and then across the province of Sonora, and up through a mythical pass into California.

"We are fortunate," Sloane said, "in having as our guide the foremost pathfinder in America today. I have every confidence that the Reverend Davis will take us to California without the loss of a single man." Then there was another touch of the bizarre which made Flint Raynor gulp. "At this time," Sloane finished, "we shall ask the Reverend to request the Divine guidance of our mission."

Men stood up, heads bared, and the Preacher prayed for twenty full minutes. When he finished the men filed out, strangely silent, looking at each other, acting as if they were coming out of a theater where they had seen a strange and unusual drama which they had not fully comprehended.

George Sloane drew Flint and the Preacher into a corner. He said, "I have already arranged for passage of the three of us with the caravan of Mr. Samuel Slade. He is leaving Westport at dawn tomorrow."

"You work fast," Flint observed.

"I want to be in Santa Fe before the rest of our men arrive," Sloane explained. "In that way I might be able to do some business in advance. I can put in my bid for the necessary wagons as they come in."

"Reckon I'm ready to start any time," Flint said, and he was wondering about Maria Teresa, the girl with the Mexican name and the blue eyes. He wondered if she'd made arrangements yet to leave for Santa Fe.

"The Slade outfit is pretty big," Sloane said, "about seventy-five wagons. I'm paying my passage to accompany the outfit. I told them you, Flint, would handle one of the wagons, and the Reverend would keep them supplied with fresh meat. Is that satisfactory?"

Both Flint and Davis nodded. Flint said thoughtfully, "You've signed up a pretty rough crew for this journey, Mr. Sloane."

"A rough crew," Sloane smiled, "for a rough journey."

In the Blue Eagle that night Flint didn't see any more of Carlita Fernandez. At eleven o'clock he went down along the river with Preacher Davis to the encampment of the Slade party. The seventy-five wagons were drawn up in the grove, waiting for the dawn. A half dozen fires were burning. Teamsters were sprawled up on top of the loads, sleeping, talking in low tones.

They were big wagons—Murphys, Pittsburghs—painted red and blue, capable of carrying five thousand pounds a piece, and they were heavily loaded, the wheels sinking deep in the soft earth.

Flint and the Preacher reported to Samuel Slade, the trader, a short, gruff man with a heavy beard. Slade sized up Flint closely, and then he said to the Preacher:

"Glad to have you, Davis. Every outfit on the trail will envy me when they hear you're going out with my party."

"It is my pleasure," the Preacher told him sincerely.

"I understand from young Sloane," Slade said, "that you won't be coming back to Westport with us."

"We intend to continue on to California," the Preacher murmured, "over a new southern route."

Samuel Slade rubbed his beard. He said quietly, "Davis, I gave you credit for more sense than that."

"The fool," the Preacher stated, "dies for want of wisdom."

"You don't believe in this southern route, Mr. Slade?" Flint asked.

The trader shook his head grimly. "No man crosses this continent," he said, "without trouble and travail. I've been across twice. The Santa Fe trail suits me now. There's enough of hell this side of the Cimarron for a man of my age."

Samuel Slade walked off, and Flint stared after him thoughtfully. There was evidently no easy crossing of the United States and every one seemed to know it, yet George Sloane was going ahead with his plans, blithely ignoring the advice of men who knew the country thoroughly. If he wanted to, he could make his crossing with any one of the wagon trains heading west. He had sufficient money to buy his own passage to Santa Fe. A pleasant, likeable young man, he would have no trouble aligning himself with any outfit leaving Westport.

"What do you think, Preacher?" Flint asked quietly.

Davis shrugged and looked up at the night sky. "We shall know the other side of Santa Fe," he said.

They went to one of the fires for a cup of coffee, and the cook at the fire said to Davis;

"Big year on the Trail, Preacher. More damned wagons headin' fer Santa Fe than I've seen in two years."

"That so," Davis nodded. He drank his coffee, sitting on an overturned box.

The cook said, "Even got a woman goin' down this year. Best damned looker I see in thirty years."

"A woman?" Davis asked, and Flint Raynor listened closely.

"Mexican woman?" Flint asked, and the Preacher glanced at him over the coffee cup.

"Mexican name," the cook nodded, "but she don't look

like no Mexican to me even though she's goin' down with a party of *vaqueros*."

The Preacher said, "What are *vaqueros* doing up in this section of the country?"

"Reckon they come up north just to take this gal back," the cook said. "They ain't talkin' to nobody. About twenty-five of 'em, riding the best damned horses I ever seen in these parts."

"She'd be the wife or the daughter of one of the *rancheros* south of Santa Fe," Preacher Davis said. He glanced at Flint and he said, "And where did you meet her, my young friend?" There was a twinkle in his eyes.

Flint smiled. He told of the fight down at the wharf that afternoon, and when he finished Preacher Davis nodded soberly.

"I had to throw Joe Flynn through the door of the Empire Saloon one evening," he said. "He is the best teamster in Westport when sober, but a devil when drunk."

Flint said to the cook, "Where is this *vaqueros* outfit?"

"A quarter mile up the river," the cook said. "You'll see them horses tied up in the grove. Can't miss 'em."

"I'll have a look," Flint said. He put his coffee cup down and stood up.

Preached Davis said solemnly, "My compliments to the *señorita*."

Flint smiled back at him as he walked off. He passed dozens of wagons, lined up, ready to roll within a day or two. Men were still working feverishly even at this hour of the night, repairing wagons, loading up, mending harness.

Within a quarter of a mile, Flint passed five different outfits, three of them Santa Fe bound, the other two headed for California and the gold fields. He located the camp of the *vaqueros* just beyond the last California-bound outfit.

A dozen of them were sitting around a big campfire, and one man was strumming a guitar, singing in a soft, musical voice. There were only two wagons, one evidently a supply wagon, loaded to the top, canvas sheet lashed across the load, and the other was a Conestoga wagon, with living quarters inside.

Miguel, the slim Mexican, stepped away from the fire when Flint came into the light. The man walked toward him, smiling. He said, "*Señor Raynor*, I am glad to see you again."

"Heard you were down here," Flint said, looking over the encampment. He saw the horses, of which the cook had spoken, superb animals, drawn up in the grove just beyond the firelight. Looking at them he could see why they hadn't been let out to graze along the river bottom. Westport was filthy with horse thieves, and animals like these would have been prizes of immense value.

"We had a most pleasant surprise," Miguel said. "The *señorita's* father had sent up this band of *vaqueros* to accompany us to Santa Fe. We shall have our own outfit rather than having to sign up with someone else."

"I see," Flint nodded, and he was thinking that *Señorita* Maria Teresa Almazon must have been tremendously wealthy if her father could send up twenty-five of his riders to bring her down to Santa Fe. He said, "The *señorita* was visiting in the States?"

"She attended school in Boston," Miguel said. "Her father sent me north last winter to accompany her home."

Flint looked around. He'd hoped to see the girl before leaving the next morning. He said, "When do you leave, Miguel?"

"In two days," the Mexican told him. "The *vaqueros* have had a long ride. Their horses need the rest before returning."

Flint glanced at the men at the fire. They were small, brown-faced men in the big, peaked *sombreros* worn be-

low the border. Flint had been told that they were the finest horsemen in the world. They sat around the fire, braiding rope, some of them singing softly to the tune of the guitar.

Then Maria Teresa came into sight, walking around the big supply wagon. She was dressed in a very becoming Mexican outfit, short velvet jacket, beautifully embroidered, flared pants, black leather boots. She was not wearing a hat, and her black hair was more beautiful than he expected.

She smiled as she came up, and she said, "We are glad to see you, *Señor Raynor*."

"It's my pleasure," Flint assured her. "I understand you are leaving for Santa Fe in two days."

"We shall be glad to be on the trail," Maria Teresa nodded. "I do not like this town."

"After what happened down at the dock," Flint observed, "I shouldn't think you would."

"You are leaving soon yourself?" the girl asked him.

"In the morning," Flint nodded. "I'm traveling with one of the Santa Fe traders."

"We shall probably pass you on the trail," Marie Teresa told him. "Our *vaqueros* travel fast, and we have but two wagons to take with us."

"I shall look for you," Flint said. "We might meet again in Santa Fe."

"We will not remain long in Santa Fe," Maria Teresa murmured. "My father is most anxious that I get back to the *hacienda*, and it is a long trip from Santa Fe, south."

"Your father is a cattle man?" Flint asked.

Miguel, standing nearby, smiled and said, "The biggest cattle raiser in all of old Mexico, my friend."

"If your route takes you near our *hacienda*," Maria Teresa said, "you and your party will be most welcome. We are on the other side of the Concepcion Range."

"I will remember it," Flint nodded. He bowed and turned to go.

Maria Teresa called after him, "Adios, Señor Raynor."
"Adios," Flint smiled, saying it awkwardly.

Back at the Slade camp, Preacher Davis was sharpening his hunting knife before one of the fires. He looked up when Flint came into the light, and he nodded, smiling faintly. His deep voice reached out at Flint. He said:

"The flowers appear on the earth; the time of the singing of the birds is come, and the voice of the turtle is heard in our land; the fig tree putteth forth her green figs, and the vines with the tender grape give a good smell. Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away."

"I hardly know the girl," Flint grinned. "Besides, her father is probably one of the richest men in old Mexico. He sent twenty-five of his riders north to accompany her home."

Preacher Davis looked at the sharp point of his knife as he held it up against the firelight. "And where is her home?" he asked.

"Other side of the Concepcion Range," Flint said.

The Preacher's eyes widened slightly. "That is some distance south and west of Santa Fe," he murmured, "and it might be in the route of our march. You are most fortunate, my young friend."

"Reckon you couldn't arrange to get lost on the other side of the Concepcion Range," Flint chuckled, "so that we'd have to stop at the Almazon *hacienda* for directions?"

"That might conveniently be arranged," Preacher Davis said dryly. "We shall see."

CHAPTER 5

THEY WERE MOVING at the first light of dawn, streaming out across the open plains, four columns of heavy wagons, hundreds of teams of big mules tearing into the harness, teamsters cracking whips, yelling, cursing for right of way.

More than one outfit was leaving this morning, all of them anxious to reach Santa Fe first in order to rent the best store concessions in which to dispose of their goods. There were rain holes on the prairie, but the sun was rapidly drying them up. The ground underneath was firm, and the mules made good time.

Handling one of the wagons, Flint saw Preacher Davis ride past on a big bay gelding, the Hawkins rifle across the pommel of the saddle, his war bag dangling from a string, heavy with the weight of the big, battered Bible. Davis' buckskin shirt and pants were blackened with the grease and soot of a thousand campfires and meals on the open plains and in the high mountains. Most of the man's belongings Flint had seen going into one of the supply wagons at the rear of the column—but he carried the Hawkins mountain rifle, and he carried the Bible.

George Sloane trotted past on the blue roan, dressed in gray with black, flat-crowned sombrero. He looked like a man riding out to see his best girl. His white shirt was

clean; he wore a colored bandanna around his neck, and he was clean-shaven. He grinned and waved a hand to Flint as he went by.

Samuel Slade's outfit lumbered past a slower-moving train which had had a few minutes start on them. By mid-morning they were sweeping out around another column, ox-driven.

Flint spotted a rider with this outfit, a man on a big buckskin horse, a man with red hair and greenish eyes who rode straight in the saddle. George Sloane was riding on the inside of the line, and as he went past the red-headed man Flint saw them stare at each other.

No words were spoken. Sloane nodded curtly and kept going. Flint caught a glimpse of the redhead's face. It was Blaze Corcoran. Corcoran had a dozen wagons with him, and Flint had a look at the crew as he went by. They did not appear to be regular Santa Fe trail drivers and crewmen. They more resembled the outfit Sloane had gathered in the back room of the Blue Eagle the night before.

There were about seventy-five men in this outfit, all of them heavily armed, men who seemed capable of defending themselves, or delivering an attack—as the case might be.

Sloane, moving past Corcoran's train, studied the men carefully. He even glanced back once as if making a count. Flint saw Blaze smiling coldly as he drove his wagon by.

They made their noon-day camp at Ribbon Rock, rolling off the trail in disorderly fashion. There was no fear of Indians until they were on the other side of Council Grove. The mules were let out to graze, and the men lolled about the camp after eating. They crawled under their wagons for shade from the hot May sun, and they smoked and talked.

Flint saw Preacher Davis riding off alone, disappearing over a rise in the prairie, a lone figure in this huge bowl

of the earth. A small stream dribbled through Ribbon Rock, a huge, stripped ledge jutting up from the plains. A tiny grove of cottonwoods sprouted at the base of the rock, along the course of the stream.

Flint was bending over the water, drinking, washing his face and hands when he heard the tinkle of laughter behind him. Turning his head, he saw first the red shoes, and then the bright orange and black dress, entirely out of place in this rough country. He looked up into the laughing eyes of Carlita Fernandez.

Slipping his hat from his head, Flint stood up, making no attempt to conceal his amazement. He'd heard that on occasions women traveled with the Santa Fe traders, but the occasions were rare. A single girl, and a pretty one, traveling with a hundred-odd men! He remembered that Maria Teresa Alamazon was doing it, but she was with a band of her father's trusted vaqueros.

"So," Carlita babbled, "the brave *señor* who rescued me from the wicked ones."

"I'm surprised to find you here," Flint managed to say. "I didn't know you were with our party."

The Mexican dancing girl pouted. "He will tell me to do this; he will tell me to do that; he . . ."

She stopped. A pebble had fallen into the water very close to where Flint was standing, splashing the bottom of his trousers. The small stone had been tossed from a point higher up on the Rock.

Carlita Fernandez whirled around, and Flint looked up to see George Sloane sitting on a ledge about fifteen feet above them, smiling down.

"Thought I told you to stay in the wagon, Carlita," Sloane said softly, looking straight at the girl.

"The wagon," Carlita snapped, "it is very hot."

"I believe," Sloane said, sliding down from his position on the ledge, "that we had better get used to the heat,

señorita." He stood in front of them, dusting his trousers, smiling coldly.

Carlita Fernandez opened her mouth to protest, and then they heard the oncoming wagons, the rumble of heavy wheels, the creak of the harness.

George Sloane snapped,

"*En seguida—pronto!*"

The dancer turned and ran, the red shoes clicking over the hard rock as she raced for the wagon near the end of the line. Flint saw another outfit coming into sight, moving past. These wagons were ox-driven, and the men riding the buckskin horse up near the head of the column had red hair and green eyes—Blaze Corcoran.

Sloane put a cigarette into his mouth and watched them go by. He said nothing until the last of Corcoran's wagons had disappeared over the crest of a nearby hill. They could still hear the rumble of the wagons.

The Easterner said quietly, "You are surprised to see the *señorita* with us, Flint?"

"A man learns to be surprised at few things," Flint observed, "if he is wise."

Sloane nodded. "She is going to Santa Fe at my expense," he stated. "I have paid Mr. Slade to reserve one of the wagons for her. I have asked her to stay close to the wagon because it is not good for a pretty girl to be seen on the Trail. It is not good for the men."

Flint ran a hand through his thick, black hair, put on his hat and picked up his canteen. He said, "I see, Mr. Sloane." There was a little mockery in his voice, too, and Sloane caught it.

Sloane said, "I appreciate the fact that you are not yet in my employ, and that you will not be until we leave Santa Fe in my wagons. Under the circumstances I am not in a position to give you an order so you may consider this a—a favor."

"Go ahead," Flint said.

"You have already been of service to *Señorita Carlita*," Sloane said quietly, "in Westport. I would greatly appreciate it if you will stay in the vicinity of her wagon at night. I am anticipating trouble in the near future."

"I will do so," Flint said, "on one condition."

Sloane took the cigarette from his mouth, looked at it, and then at Flint, his brown eyes narrowed slightly. He said, "And what is that?"

"That you tell me what you are afraid of," Flint said coolly. "Since I'm to protect the girl from harm, I should know in which direction to look for trouble."

Sloane grinned. "I am afraid," he said, "that *Señorita Carlita Fernandez* will be kidnapped. I can tell you no more than that."

Flint frowned. The answer meant nothing as he'd assumed as much after the attempted abduction in the Blue Eagle. What he wanted to know was why, and who was behind the attempt.

"In due time," Sloane said, as if reading his mind, "you shall know more about this matter, Flint. I am not in a position to reveal it now."

"I'll keep an eye on the *señorita*," Flint said, "for the *señorita's* sake."

"I am sure," Sloane grinned, "that she will be safe in your hands, Flint."

They camped that night at Elk Springs, once again the wagons turning off the trail with no semblance of order. No corral was formed, and only a few sentinels set out to watch the stock. The best horses as usual were kept close to the wagons.

Preacher Davis came in at sunset with no meat. It was still poor game country. He sat down beside Flint as they gathered around the big campfire for supper. Flint saw Sloane taking a tray from the cook's wagon, walking

with it toward the wagon in which Carlita Fernandez was staying.

The Preacher watched him thoughtfully over his coffee cup, and then he said, "So he brought her along."

Flint glanced at the big man. "You know about it?" he asked.

"I know young Sloane concealed the girl in one of the wagons before we left Westport," Davis said. "I do not know why." He added slowly, "And I do not believe Sloane is the kind of man who must have a woman with him all the time."

"Which makes it a very strange matter," Flint stated, "that he should take her all the way to Santa Fe."

"Let us hope," the Preacher said, "that he does not intend to take her to California over the new route."

Flint stared at him as he sipped the black coffee and sampled one of the sour-dough biscuits. He said quietly, "Sloane has asked me to keep an eye on the wagon because he is afraid *Señorita* Fernandez will be abducted."

Preacher Davis said gloomily. "The Lord hath created a new thing in the earth. A woman shall compass a man."

Flint slept on top of the wagon adjoining the one in which Carlita Fernandez stayed. The teamsters had turned in early because Slade insisted on a start at the crack of dawn.

Preacher Davis sat before the dying campfire for an hour after Flint left him. From his position atop the big wagon, Flint could see him bent over his Bible, occasionally licking his thumb with his tongue as he turned a page.

The stars had filled the sky when Flint fell asleep. He awoke with a drop of cold rain on his face, and blackness above him. Another man was stirring on top of the load, lifting his head. It was Preacher Davis.

He said, "We get this weather in the springtime on the

trail. I have seen it cloud up in thirty minutes, and the fountains of heaven open up."

Flint picked up his blankets with the intention of climbing down and crawling beneath the wagon. It was then that he heard a distant shot, and three quick shots in succession—the alarm signal of the night herders watching the stock.

A man yelled from a nearby wagon, "Runnin' off stock!"

Preacher Davis sat where he was, listening intently. They could hear the faint patter of rain on canvas coverings all around them, and they could feel it on their faces.

Men were clambering down from wagon tops, yelling as the alarm spread through the camp that a raid was being made on the stock. Flint heard Samuel Slade run, cursing fluently, issuing orders.

"Every man out here," he was yelling. "We can leave the camp. There aren't Injuns in this part of the country to attack wagons."

Flint hesitated on the edge of the wagon top. The Preacher still had not moved. He was listening, head up toward the darkened sky, the raindrops falling on his face.

Flint said to him, "You coming, Preacher?"

"Might be more interesting here," Davis said softly.

Flint relaxed. "You don' think it's a raid on the stock?" he asked.

"I'll know in a few minutes," the Preacher told him. "Didn't Sloane tell you he feared another attempt to kidnap *Señorita Fernandez*?"

Flint stared at him in the darkness. He turned to look at the wagon next to their own. Men were running in the darkness, counting horses, riding out of the camp. Two of the big brush fires which had burned down low were blazing again as someone threw brush on them to give light.

The firelight flickered on the canvas sides of the

Conestoga in which Carlita slept. Raindrops hissed into the fires. Off on the plains Flint¹ heard several more shots, but still Preacher Davis did not move.

The camp was quieting down with most of the men gone when Davis suddenly put a leg over the side. He said softly, "All right."

Flint heard it a moment later—running footsteps approaching Carlita Fernandez's wagon. He saw three shadows coming out of the mist of rain, indistinct in the poor light, heading straight for the wagon. One man detached himself from the other two and went around the right side toward the rear opening. The other two were preparing to break through the front.

Preacher Davis put a hand on Flint's shoulder and pushed him toward the back of the wagon. He headed for the front himself, running noiselessly like a great panther.

Flint slipped the Colt gun from the holster. He whirled around the wagon just as a tall man was climbing up on the tailboard.

Reaching up, Flint grabbed the man by the shoulder with his free hand and yanked him back. He was not quite ready for what happened next. A big fist exploded in his face, knocking him backward, rolling him over on the ground. The left side of his face was numb from the blow as he came up on hands and knees and darted forward.

He came in low under his man, ramming him against the tailboard of the wagon. He didn't want to shoot because this time he wanted one of the abductors alive.

He heard his man gasp with pain as his spine struck the rear of the wagon. He swung with his free hand, hitting for the face. He thought that he had his man, when, suddenly his shoulders were grabbed by a pair of incredibly strong hands. He was swung around and hit several times in the face.

This time his mouth was cut as he sprang back, slashing

with the gun barrel, swinging with his free hand again. He heard the muffled curse as in the darkness his fist collided with a man's nose.

Around the other side of the wagon he could make out the sounds of another terrific struggle. He heard a man's pain-racked scream, and then Carlita screeching inside the wagon. A gun boomed.

Flint kept forcing his way in, hitting, taking powerful blows in exchange, slipping a little on the now muddy ground. He was driven to his knees on one occasion, but he got up immediately and knocked his man back against the wagon.

He tripped over a tether rope as he drove forward, and as he fell a gun winked orange flame in front of him. The bullet grazed his temple as he pitched forward on the grounds. He heard George Sloane yelling: "Flint . . . Flint."

Flint's assailant stumbled away among the wagons. The rain was coming down in torrents now, drenching Flint to the skin. He tried to follow his man, but he bumped into someone else. It was George Sloane.

"Did they get her?" Sloane was yelling, his voice vibrant with emotion. He was holding Flint by the arms.

"I believe she's all right," Flint panted. "Let's see how the Preacher made out."

They found Davis sitting on the wagon tongue rubbing his head ruefully. Carlita was looking out through the wagon opening, babbling in Spanish and in English.

"They got away, Preacher?" Flint asked him.

"Thought one of them had a broken head," Davis said calmly, "but that couldn't be if he got away. I believe I was hit with a gun barrel by a third man who came up."

"You see any of them?" Sloane wanted to know.

"Too dark," Davis said. "They picked a good night to run off stock." His voice was dry now.

Sloane went over to speak with the girl. Flint couldn't

hear what they said, but Carlita closed the flap again, fastening it from the inside. Sloane came back. He said:

"Come over to my wagon. we'll see if we can fix up a hot cup of coffee. Both of you look kind of done in."

They were sitting inside Sloane's wagon ten minutes later, a lantern hanging from the overhead beam, the rain beating on the canvas roof, when they heard Slade's riders coming in. George Sloane sat on the edge of a cot he'd rigged up inside the wagon.

He sipped the coffee he'd bribed the cook to make for them, and he smiled at Flint. He said, "You men were right. That raid was faked to draw most of our crew off while these other chaps tried to kidnap the *señorita*."

"A woman," Preacher Davis said, "was the cause of the first misery on this earth, young man."

"That's so," Sloane agreed cheerfully. "More coffee, Reverend?"

"You think there'll be more attempts to kidnap Carlita before we reach Santa Fe?" Flint asked.

Sloane shook his head. "They know we'll be watching for that now," he said. "They'll try something else."

"Like what?" Flint asked. "It's my neck I'm sticking out."

"I don't know," Sloane told him frankly. He offered absolutely no information. He said, "This coffee, gentlemen, is the best I've tasted since coming West."

"I'm not interested in coffee," Flint said laconically, "and neither is the Preacher."

"Then shall we listen to stories of some of the Reverend's adventures in the great West?" Sloane asked suavely.

Flint scowled at him. He said no more on the subject.

CHAPTER 6

IN THE MORNING the sun was out again, and there were rain puddles everywhere, and spring flowers shooting up out of the prairie soil. Samuel Slade had his wagons rolling a little after dawn, the night herders bringing in the stock while it was still dark, and the men munching their breakfast in the dim light preceding the dawn.

They made good time, camping that night at Wakarusa Point, and the following day at Hundred-and-Ten-Mile Creek. Slade called a halt at a comparatively early hour, the teamsters having hustled since early morning, with only a brief halt at midday.

It was four o'clock in the afternoon when Maria Teresa's *vaqueros* moved past, the two wagons rattling, the riders jogging along, moving at about twice the speed the average trader rolled with his heavily loaded wagons.

The Slade teamsters watched them go by, staring at the girl riding with the *vaqueros*. She was sitting astride a beautiful sorrel horse and she rode well.

Flint was unharnessing his mules about twenty-five yards off the trail when he saw her. When the girl slowed down and dropped out of the line of march, he left the mules with another teamster and walked out to meet her.

George Sloane was smoking a cigar as he sat up on one

of the wagon seats. Out of the corner of his eye, Flint saw him take the cigar out of his mouth and lean forward a little.

"*Buenas tardas*," the girl smiled.

"I wouldn't know what that meant," Flint grinned.

"Good afternoon," Maria Teresa chuckled. "I speak Spanish constantly with the men. I forgot that you are a Yankee."

"You speak English very well yourself," Flint observed.

"My mother was an Englishwoman," the girl explained.

"I was taught English in my home, and I spoke it all the time while I was at school in the States."

Flint rubbed the nose of the sorrel horse. He knew the teamsters were gawking at him. Slade, himself, was coming up from the Creek.

"You didn't waste any time coming from Westport," Flint said. He watched the last of the *vaqueros* go by with a jingle of bells and accoutrements. Miguel lifted a friendly hand to him as he went by.

"We have fine mounts," Maria Teresa told him, "and the wagons are not heavily loaded. Miguel thinks we will be in Santa Fe many days before the first trader arrives."

"And you will leave immediately?" Flint asked, some small disappointment in his voice.

"My father is most anxious that I return to the *hacienda*," the girl murmured. "There is to be a big celebration in honor of my graduation from the American school."

"Let's hope," Flint said, "that one of your wagons break down so that we shall meet again."

Slade came up then, touching his hat. He said with his usual gruffness, "Ma'am, I'd be damned careful of them horses. Traders have been losin' stock right along this spring."

"Indians?" Maria Teresa asked him quietly.

"Worse than Injuns," Slade scowled. "White ruffians from Westport. They hide out along this section o' the

trail, raidin' the stock at night, and whatever they run off they take back to Westport and sell again. We had a little run in with 'em the other night, ourselves."

"We'll be careful," the girl assured him.

"Best horses I've ever seen on the trail," Slade told her. "Better set double gaurds tonight and the next few nights. If you lose stock out here you either go back to Westport or walk the rest of the way to Santa Fe, and it's damned rough walkin'."

Maria Teresa thanked him for the advice. She nodded again to Flint, gave him a quick smile, and then galloped her horse after the *vaqueros* and the two wagons.

When Flint walked back George Sloane was sitting on the wagon tongue, humming softly.

He said when Flint came up, "For a Boone Licks, Kentucky, man you do pretty well, Flint. That's the best-looking girl I've seen since leaving New York."

"That's nice," Flint said. He offered no information.

Sloane laughed jovially. "I would conjecture the daughter of some rich *hacienda* owner below Santa Fe," he said.

"That could be," Flint smiled.

"And you met her in Westport," Sloane grinned. "I will never forgive myself for missing such an opportunity. Congratulations, my friend."

"The chances are I'll never see her again," Flint scowled, and he walked off. He watched Maria Teresa and the *vaqueros* move up over a rise in the ground, and then disappear.

Preacher Davis came in after dusk. He'd shot a buffalo or two, the first they'd seen on the trail. Several men were dispatched to bring in the meat while the Preacher went to the big cook fire to eat. He sat down on the ground next to Flint.

"Saw your lady on the Trail this afternoon, Flint," he said casually "They must have passed here after you stopped."

"I spoke with her," Flint nodded. "They were moving pretty fast."

The Preacher filled his plate with sizzling bacon and sour-dough bread. He said, "And they might not move so fast after tonight, my young friend."

Flint looked at him. "Why?" he asked.

"Evil men have come in to the land," the Preacher said. "Horse stealers."

Flint frowned. "You think they're after the *vaquero* horses?" he asked.

"When I saw them," the Preacher said, "they were passing this encampment several miles to the west. I believe your friend is encamped a half-dozen miles south of us."

"You recognized the men?" Flint asked.

"Some of them I have seen in Westport," the Preacher nodded.

"Not Corcoran," Flint said.

"Corcoran's men ride good horses," the Preacher said thoughtfully. "This is another crowd. I believe they will make their raid tonight." He cleared his throat and he added, "Thought you might like to ride ahead with me tonight to warn them."

Flint looked at him. The Preacher was eating, staring gravely into the fire.

"Reckon I would like it," Flint grinned. "When do we start?"

"We'll leave in an hour," Davis added. "We must give ourselves ample time to prepare a little reception for our friends tonight."

George Sloane came over when they were saddling up an hour later. He said curiously, "Where away tonight, Preacher?"

The Preacher glanced at Flint, letting him give the answer. Flint said somewhat reluctantly,

"The Preacher thinks a band of horse thieves are going

to attack that *vaqueros* camp tonight. We're going up to warn them."

Sloane whistled softly. "A fight," he murmured. "I should like to be in on it."

"A fool walks," the Preacher said, "where angels fear to tread."

"Then, I'd be walking with two other fools," Sloane grinned. Then the grin left his face and he scowled. He was looking past them, looking at the wagon in which Carlita Fernandez was riding. He said slowly, "I'll have to forego this pleasure, gentlemen. Another time." He said to Flint, "Give my regards to the beautiful *señorita*."

"I will," Flint nodded, and he experienced a feeling of relief. He did not want Sloane to meet Maria Teresa. Sloane was too polished, too handsome, and he had too much of the devil inside of him.

As they rode away from the encampment a little before dusk, the Preacher said thoughtfully, "Our friend is much concerned about the Spanish girl. He will not leave the encampment even when he feels there is not much danger."

"Reckon he's playing for big stakes," Flint said, "and he feels he can't afford to gamble."

"What stakes?" the Preacher asked. Flint wished he knew the answer.

They followed the well-marked Santa Fe trail for about three miles before the Preacher pointed to the bright light on the horizon.

"Their campfire," he stated. "We shall be there in thirty minutes."

A sentinel halted them when they were within fifty yards of the encampment. The Preacher said:

"*Amigos*."

Flint could see the firelight on the two wagons. Men were waiting with drawn guns. The horses were tied close

to the camp, indicating that the *vaqueros* weren't going to be caught napping.

Miguel came out beyond the firelight. He said tersely, "Who is it, *amigos*?"

"Flint Raynor," Flint said. "Can we come in?"

"*Ojala!*" Miguel laughed. "Señor Raynor. You are welcome."

They walked forward, the *vaqueros* looking at them curiously, dwarfed by the great height of the Preacher.

"Preacher Davis," Flint introduced the big man. "You must have heard of the Preacher in Westport."

"In Westport," Miguel laughed, "in St. Louis, in Santa Fe, in Chihuahua, everywhere Preacher Davis is known and welcome."

Maria Teresa was standing by the fire when they came up. She smiled when she saw Flint.

"We meet again," she said.

"We have bad news tonight," Flint told her. "The Preacher believes that band of horse thieves will attack your camp tonight and try to run off your horses."

Miguel scowled. "We will give them a warm welcome, *amigos*," he said.

Maria Teresa looked up at the Preacher. "You are sure?" she asked.

"Riding this way," the Preacher nodded. "There are no outfits beyond you, and they passed Slade's camp. That means they'll be hitting you tonight."

"We are grateful to you for coming out," Maria Teresa said quietly. She turned to Miguel. "Are all the horses in?" she asked.

"We watered them and brought them directly back to the wagons," Miguel told her. "They were permitted to graze for an hour before dark."

Maria Teresa looked at the Preacher. She said, "How many were in this party, Señor Davis?"

"Maybe twenty-five," the Preacher told her.

"I would suggest," Flint said, "that you let the Preacher prepare the reception for them. He is familiar with raiding parties."

The girl looked at the Preacher hopefully, and Davis nodded his head. He said, "They will not come till after midnight. How many men and horses do you have?"

"Twenty-five men," Miguel told him, "and fifty horses, extra mounts for the men, and mules for the wagons."

The Preacher studied the encampment carefully. The two wagons were drawn up along a tiny stream. The horses were staked just outside the firelight, and a short distance back from the stream.

The Preacher said, "The stakes will pull up as the raiders ride in here, whooping loud enough."

"What do you suggest?" Maria Teresa asked.

"Loosen the stakes," the Preacher said calmly. "Let them run the stock off. They'll come in from the west and will try to run the horses east in the direction of Westport. We'll be waiting for them out on the plains."

Flint smiled broadly. "You mean we cut in between them and the horses after they've run through our camp?" he asked.

Davis nodded. "We can have the *vaqueros* stationed a few hundred yards out beyond the encampment. They'll be mounted on their best horses. We'll leave the other mounts where they are, with the stakes loosened so that they will not hurt themselves when they break away."

Flint looked at Miguel and Maria Teresa. Miguel was nodding vigorously, and the girl seemed satisfied with the plan.

"We might be watched now," Preacher Davis stated. "Have your men start to drift out into the shadows when the fire begins to burn low." He looked at Maria Teresa, and he said, "Ma'am, you'd better stay in the wagon. They might start to fire when we break in on them."

The girl frowned, but Miguel said quickly, "I have

promised your father I would bring you back safely. He will hold me responsible if anything happens. For my sake, *Señorita*."

Maria Teresa nodded. "I shall expect you to be careful," she said. "I would rather lose horses than men." She said to the Preacher, "We are grateful to you both for coming out to help us."

The Preacher looked at the ground, and that twinkle was in his eyes again. He said blandly, "It is our pleasure, ma'am."

Flint had a chance to say a few words to the girl before they slipped out of camp. As he walked over with her to the wagon, he wondered aloud, "Do you think your outfit would do better to travel along with Mr. Slade's? You'll have that much more protection on the way to Santa Fe. They tell me we'll be moving through Indian country in another week or two."

"We are not worried," Maria Teresa assured him. "Our men are all good shots and we are heavily armed. Father sent a message by one of the men that he has another body of *vaqueros* waiting for us in Santa Fe. I should not like to keep them waiting."

Flint stared at her. He said slowly, "How many men does your father have riding for him?"

The girl laughed lightly. "He has the largest *hacienda* in Sonora," she said, "and many riders. I have never counted them."

"I see," Flint murmured. He'd never had more than a few coins in his own pockets at any time. He'd worked his way up the Missouri, stoking the fire box on the packet. He wondered how much chance a man in that position had with a girl like this.

They left the camp a few minutes later, the *vaqueros* having let the fire die down. In small groups they saddled up and walked their horses out into the darkness east of the camp. The grass grew belly high here, and the men

took up positions several hundred yards outside the camp, forming a wide semi-circle.

Preacher Davis sat down in the grass with Flint. They listened to the croaking of the frogs in the stream and the distant call of the coyotes. A bat swooped down low over them, and Flint's horse jumped a little.

The Preacher said thoughtfully, "She is a fine girl, Flint."

"Her father has more money than the United States government," Flint scowled.

"And from what I can see in his daughter," the Preacher smiled, "he does not take it seriously. Do not be discouraged."

They sat for an hour, listening to the frogs, and then the Preacher stood up.

"Coming in," he said softly.

Flint didn't hear anything. The Preacher whistled softly to Miguel, who was stationed thirty yards to the right. It was the signal for the men to prepare themselves.

A short while later Flint heard the hammer of horses' hooves in the distance, and then came a wild yell as the horse thieves whirled into the camp, driving the remaining horses before them.

Several shots were fired, and they could hear the exultant yells of the raiders as they swept through the camp, heading east with the horses, coming directly toward them as they waited in the high grass.

They slid into the saddles and waited. Flint had his gun drawn, the hammer cocked. He saw a horse dash by, and then another. A rider was heading straight toward them, dimly outlined against the night sky.

The Preacher let out a whoop which nearly broke Flint's eardrum. It was a wild mountain yell, coming up from the most powerful chest in the West. He drove his horse forward, firing as he rode.

Other riders were coming up behind the man in the

lead, but the raiders pulled up very abruptly now, hearing the Preacher's yell. A man roared, "Injuns!"

The Preacher whooped again, and Flint yelped, also, simulating the cry of the Indians he'd heard in Kentucky. Miguel's *vaqueros* charged in, firing as they came riding fast and furious.

It was too much for the horse stealers. Firing a few desperate shots, they whirled their horses and headed north away from the camp. Several saddles were emptied as the *vaqueros* tore in among them. Flint saw the Preacher catch up with one man, grasp him by the back of the shirt with one powerful arm, and literally lift him from the saddle.

The rider screamed in terror as he was tossed into the grass. The Preacher roared again, and then he pulled up his horse. He called to Miguel, who was riding close by, "Better send a few men after the horses. This crowd will keep riding till they reach Westport."

An hour later they had all the stampeded horses back at the encampment, and the Preacher and Flint were preparing to go.

Maria Teresa said admiringly to them, "You have saved our horses. I don't know how to thank you."

"We shall meet again," the Preacher told her, "and that will be thanks enough for Mr. Raynor, I believe.

Flint felt himself redden in the firelight. He said hastily, "We shall look for your father's *hacienda* on the other side of the Concepcion Range."

"You will always be welcome," Maria Teresa smiled at him. She held out her hand and they shook it.

Riding away, Preacher Davis said softly, "Thou art all fair, my love. There is no spot in thee."

Flint Raynor didn't say anything, but he was thinking the same thing.

CHAPTER 7

THEY REACHED Council Grove the seventh day out of Westport, and Samuel Slade called a three-day halt to cut extra axles and wagons tongues from the groves of hickory and willow which grew abundantly in the vicinity.

The line of march was considerably tightened after leaving the Grove. Wagon corrals were formed at night, and double guards set as they neared the Arkansas, former boundary line between the United States and old Mexico.

Kiowas and Comanches roamed the high plains this side of the Arkansas, and they were not always friendly, running off stock on every possible occasion, trying to pick off hunting parties or careless individuals who strayed too far from the enclosures after dark.

After two weeks, Flint was handling his teams of mules with the skill of the accomplished mulero. He'd gotten them into the swing of travel very quickly, and after awhile it became the accepted thing to rise before dawn each morning, harness the mules the night herders had driven in, and roll his wagon on the trail as the light started to come into the sky.

At night he usually slept on top of one of the wagons near that of Carlita Fernandez, but he did not see much

of the girl, and apparently George Sloane did not either. The Easterner spoke with her occasionally, and once in a while he ate with her, but he never forced his attentions on the girl, even though Flint got the impression at times that the fiery Carlita would not have minded a little attention from the handsome Sloane.

Sloane's was an eternal vigilance, not the vigilance of the jealous lover, but something which lay beyond that—something which Flint Raynor lay awake nights trying to fathom, but never coming close to the answer.

He spoke to Preacher Davis about it one night as they lay awake on top of the wagon, looking at the stars. He said, "I have the feeling that Corcoran is the man who is trying to abduct Carlita. I believe he was the man I fought with at her wagon the first night out from Westport."

"What interest would Corcoran have in her?" the Preacher wanted to know.

"She could be a wealthy Mexican girl from one of the *haciendas* below Santa Fe," Flint observed, "captured by the Apaches, sold and resold a few times until she was brought north by a white trader. Sloane is now taking her back to Santa Fe for the big ransom money her father might be offering."

"So Corcoran," Davis smiled, "who is in this despicable business, wants to take the girl away from Sloane and earn the ransom money, himself."

"Does it make sense?" Flint asked.

"It is a good explanation for these mysteries," Davis said, "except for one thing. I have lived at some of the *haciendas* across the border. I know a number of wealthy Mexican *rancheros* and their families. They are the most cultured people in America. The girls are well-bred, like *Señorita* Marie Teresa. Is there any difference between Maria Teresa and Carlita Fernandez?"

"Difference of night and day," Flint admitted.

"A girl with the upbringing of Maria Teresa would not be seen dancing in an American saloon," the Preacher went on. "Carlita Fernandez is not the daughter of a wealthy *ranchero*. I am positive of that."

Flint frowned. "You have a explanation?" he asked.

"In due season," Davis stated, "all things will be revealed. Now we see through a mirror darkly."

"I'd hate to be dead on some Mexican desert," Flint said dryly, "when that happens."

They reached the Arkansas three days later, a shallow, muddy river, speckled with flat, grassy inlands, and thickly set with stands of cottonwood. The crossing was made at the Chouteau's Island, and the water barrels filled on the other side for the dreaded dry *jornada*.

There were two routes to be followed here: one which paralleled the Arkansas River to Bent's Fort, and then down to Santa Fe, the longer route; the other directly across the desert, a stiff route for man and beast, but considerably shorter. Samuel Slade customarily made the desert crossing.

It was fifty miles to Sand Creek, the next regular stop on the Trail after leaving the Arkansas, but they made it in one feverish haul, the teamsters driving the mules pitilessly over the burning sand, stopping only to water them occasionally, keeping on even at dusk, starting long before dawn when it was still comparatively cool.

The miles were nearly covered when they reached the sandy water of the Creek. Flint rolled his wagon from the Trail and leaped down stiffly. The heat had burned all the moisture out of him. He was half-blinded from staring into the shimmering heat waves, taking the dust of wagons ahead of him.

In the Creek he squatted down on hands and knees, bathing his face and arms, drinking for a long time. He had his teams watered and fed when he came back to the

enclosure to find Carlita Fernandez sitting up on the seat of her wagon.

She'd suffered all the way on this trip, but today it had been little short of agony for her in the jouncing wagon. Her face was drawn and tense. She'd lost considerable weight, and the monotony and boredom of sitting inside the wagon most of the time had upset her emotionally. She was near the breaking point—a point where even men did not interest her.

She waved a hand, signalling for Flint to come over. Assuming that she wanted her water barrel filled, he went over.

"It was kind of rough today," he smiled.

Usually, he stayed away from her, not wishing Sloane to get the impression that he was trying to worm his way into her confidence. On only infrequent occasions he'd spoken to her, and he knew that the girl resented his ignoring her. In town, she'd been accustomed to men constantly chasing her.

The Mexican girl snapped tersely when Flint came up, "You do not wish to see me—no?"

Flint shrugged. "I have my teams and my wagon to look after," he explained. "I am employed by Mr. Slade on this trip."

"You are a fool, *Señor* Raynor," Carlita grated. "I can make you a thousand times richer than even *Señor* Slade. Why do you think they try to kidnap me? Why do you think *Señor* Sloane is so careful to hide me in this wagon?"

Flint lighted his pipe as he glanced up at her. He puffed on it leisurely but he said nothing, knowing that the excitable Mexican girl would not stop now that she had started.

"You are one big fool, *Señor* Raynor, she almost whispered, her voice shrill. "I know where there is gold—more gold than can be dug up in all of California."

Flint saw George Sloane coming up from the Creek,

leading his blue roan. Sloane was coming straight toward them, slapping dust from his pants, his hat pulled low over his eyes. He was smiling when he stopped before the wagon.

Carlita Fernandez had shut up abruptly when she saw him coming. She was staring straight ahead of her, face set tight, a very different girl from the vivacious dancer who had left Westport weeks before.

Sloane said softly, "And how is my beautiful lady?"

"I will be happy," Carlita hit out, "when we reach Santa Fe."

"Of course," Sloane grinned. "You may dance and sing and wear your pretty clothes again."

Flint was watching the girl's face when Sloane spoke. She should have brightened up at the thought, but she didn't. She stared straight ahead of her, her lips cracked by the heat of the desert, her face drawn.

"And how long shall we stay in Santa Fe?" she grated, "One day?"

Sloane flashed Flint a quick look, and Flint got up, puffing on the pipe. He walked nonchalantly away and sat down on the tongue of his own wagon. He was still smoking a few minutes later when Sloane came over. Carlita had gone inside her suffocatingly hot wagon.

The Easterner stood in front of Flint, looking down at him, a quirt in his hand. He slapped the quirt idly against his leg, and he said finally:

"What are you thinking, my friend?"

Flint looked at the pipe. He said, "I didn't figure a woman would be coming along with us to California. Is that wise?"

Sloane had a two days' growth of fuzz on his cheeks. It was the first time Flint had seen him unshaven, but they'd been short of water. He'd lost weight, too, on this trip, but it had made him harder, leaner, taken some of

the Eastern softness out of him. He'd thrived on hardships where other Easterners were broken by them.

He said slowly, "Flint, I told you once before that if you are not a fool you stand to gain much on this trip."

"No man knows how much he will make in California," Flint said.

"I was speaking of another matter," Sloane smiled. "Be wise and don't try to pry into something until I'm ready to tell you about it."

"I wasn't prying," Flint said stiffly.

"My apologies," Sloane murmured. "I am speaking foolishness. It must be this damned desert heat."

"It is more foolishness," Flint observed, "to take a woman along on the kind of trip we are planning."

"We shall talk of that later," Sloane said. "I am no man's fool, Flint. Remember that. Nor a woman's."

"I didn't think you were," Flint said dryly. When Sloane went away he knocked the ashes out of the pipe and put it back in the pocket of his buckskin shirt. He was thinking of Carlita's remark concerning the gold—more gold than could be dug up in California. The Mexican dancing girl was either getting delirious from the heat, or she did know where there was much gold. The fact that George Sloane and Blaze Corcoran were accepting her story, whatever it was, was proof enough that she was not out of her mind. Neither Sloane nor Corcoran were the type of men who followed the rain-bow.

CHAPTER 8

THEY LEFT Sand Creek, pushing on toward the south and the west, conscious of the fact that they were in Indian country now, and knowing they were being watched every moment.

Preacher Davis said succinctly to Flint, "Comanche country. They might give us trouble. They have before."

"They as bad as the Kiowas?" Flint asked him. He'd heard talk of the Kiowas along the Trail, very unpleasant Indians with a penchant for tying captive Santa Fe traders to the spokes of their wagon wheels and then building slow fires underneath them.

"Not an Indian in America can handle a horse like a Comanche," Preacher Davis stated. "Wildest riders, and some of the hardest fighters."

Even at the noon-day camps Slade kept a circle of sentinels on the surrounding hills. He had long talks with Preacher Davis and seemed to be on edge. Then one day Flint saw a flash of light on a distant hill. It looked for a moment like the sun flashing on an outcropping of quartz, but when he pointed it out to the Preacher, the big man said:

"Comanche mirrors. There's another one."

He pointed toward the east and Flint saw an answering flash of light.

"Trouble?" he asked the Preacher.

Davis nodded gravely. "Reckon they're setting something up for us, Flint. This outfit would be a rich prize for the Comanches."

George Sloane was curious, also, but inclined to take the Comanche threat lightly. He said to Flint as they stood around the evening campfire drinking coffee:

"There are too many guns in this outfit. The Indians like to hit at small parties. They'll lose plenty if they ride against this crowd."

"Not if they hit us when we don't expect them," the Preacher murmured, "and that's when Indians always strike."

"We have scouts out all the time," Sloane argued good-naturedly. "You're far out ahead of this wagon train as we travel, Preacher. Can they get by you?"

"Got by me before," the Preacher admitted.

George Sloane frowned a little now and glanced in the direction of Carlita's wagon. Watching him, Flint had the feeling that Sloane wouldn't be particularly concerned if the whole outfit were wiped out as long as he and the Mexican girl survived.

"I understand they usually strike at dawn," Sloane murmured.

"Any hour of the day," the Preacher explained. "Any hour when the white man is not expecting him."

"This white man," George Sloane grinned, "will be expecting them momentarily from now on." He added thoughtfully, "I don't intend to let a party of red savages spoil my plans."

That night a double guard was set out, Flint going with the first guard detail. The men were nervous as he rode out with them, all of them having seen those mirror signals during the afternoon, and knowing what they meant.

The horses were kept close to the wagons this night, most of them tethered or picketed. Flint sat astride his horse just below the rim of a low hill, keeping out of the moonlight as best he could.

He watched a pair of coyotes slink past on a nearby ridge, and he waited for the first feathered head to appear, indicating that the Comanches were drawing in, but his watch was uneventful. They neither saw nor heard the Comanches during the night, and in the morning most of the men around the breakfast fires were saying boastfully that the Comanches didn't like the looks of them.

Preacher Davis said nothing. Flint watched the big scout as he sat to one side, his tin cup in one hand, and a tin plate full of beans and bacon and sour-dough bread in the other.

"What do you think?" Flint asked him. "Figured they'd give us a go this morning."

"There is a season and a time to every purpose," the Preacher droned. "A time to be born; a time to die; a time to kill—," He paused. "The heathens have not decided upon their time, but they will come."

"No one has even seen them," Flint pointed out.

"The most dangerous Indians are the ones you do not see. An Indian I see I am forewarned against."

Flint watched for the Comanches that morning as he drove his wagon. There were no more mirror flashings, no smoke signals, no dust trailers nothing to indicate that there were others than themselves in the vicinity. The sand hills were dead and lifeless, the heat rising from them, the Trail twisting through, cut deep by the wheels of thousands upon thousands of wagons which had preceded them through the years.

They left a twisting dust cloud behind them as they pushed through the hills, a cloud which hung in the air, the individual particles of alkali glittering in the mid-day

sun. At high noon they camped on the north bank of a stream known as *Los Americanos*. Immediately, Samuel Slade sent out his pickets to patrol the near hills. Preacher Davis ate hastily and rode off alone on his horse, looking for sign, a quiet man this day, a man anticipating trouble.

Flint ate his dinner, sitting on a rock near the fire, and constantly his eyes searched the surrounding hills. Behind those ridges a thousand wild Comanches could be hidden, waiting for them to move on again, ready to attack.

George Sloane came over and sat down next to Flint, a cup of coffee in his hand.

"Still quiet," he observed.

"Too quiet," Flint told him, "according to the Preacher. Reckon he's looking for hell to break loose any moment."

Sloane shook his head in mock sorrow. "Life would be so much sweeter," he said, "if it were not for the heathen."

"Be pretty tough on you," Flint said, "if they wiped us out. All your great plans die with you."

"That's the pity of it," Sloane agreed calmly.

Flint just looked at him, and then shook his head. They took the usual two hour mid-day rest, giving the stock time to graze, and then the animals were drawn in, yoked, and the wagons started to roll.

The stream, *Los Americanos*, was not particularly wide, not more than thirty yards across, the water coming up to the wheel hubs at the fording place. The approach to the stream, however, was not too inviting. High sand banks stretched for miles up and down along the river, and the wagons had to be taken down these cutbanks into the water, and hauled up the other side.

The banks were broken down by the passage of previous outfits, but the going was still very rough, and one wagon nearly overturned as it skidded down the bank into the water.

As Flint was guiding his teams into the stream, he

saw Preacher Davis riding up. The Preacher had gone south, and he was returning now from the east, having made a circuit of the territory ahead of them. Flint watched him sitting astride his horse on the south bank, watching the wagons splashing into the water. Some were already coming out on the other side. Point riders were fanning out ahead of the caravan. Other riders were moving away to the east and to the west. The excess stock waited along the bank of the river until the wagons had crossed before being driven over. The rear guard, five men, sat astride their horses at the river's edge, also, and this was the weakness of the outfit. The rear guard was to remain behind, moving along slowly after the excess stock had crossed. But at this moment as the river crossing was made, they were up with the outfit. It was from this direction that the wily Comanches struck.

Flint was moving his wagon up out of the river when he heard the sudden commotion behind him. There were three wagons in the river, several up ahead of him, and the remaining wagons lined up on the north bank, ready to cross when the Comanche horde hammered down from the north, the one direction from which they were not particularly expected.

Flint heard Preacher Davis' shout. A warning gun was banging behind him. Samuel Slade, on the south bank, yelled frantically for the wagoners to circle.

Looking behind him, as he followed the wagon ahead, moving in a circle now, Flint saw the Comanches driving down from a ridge. There was a wide line of them, at least three or four hundred in number, riding low, screaming as they came, half-hidden behind their horses' heads.

The hot sun reflected on lance and rifle barrel. Feathers flopped crazily. Riders with hideously painted faces and bodies tore down the grade toward the wagons remaining on the north bank. Rifles started to crackle.

Preacher Davis, roaring for men to follow him, plunged

his horse into the stream and crossed to the other side, where the wagons were also trying to maneuver into position to ward off attack. With no leader on that side, however, the men were hopelessly confused.

Flint leaped from the wagon after he'd drawn it up behind the one ahead of him. Catching a horse tied to a tailgate he rode across after the Preacher, passing the three wagons which had been in the water when the Comanches hit. They were struggling to reach the other bank, but several of the mules had gone down, having lost their footing.

When Flint reached the north bank he saw that the Preacher was bringing some order to the scene, directing the teamsters to draw their wagons in a semi-circle so that the river would be at their backs.

Already, arrows were whistling through the air, and as Flint ran with his rifle toward an opening between two of the wagons, he saw a teamster throw up his hands, scream horribly, and then pitch forward between his mules, an arrow protruding from his ribs.

The Comanches were less than fifty yards away now, and Flint could see their painted faces as they tore in at the wagons. He fired at a buck on a spotted brown and white pony, his bullet stopping the pony. The buck went flying over the animal's head as it crashed to the ground. He landed nimbly on his feet, started to run, and then a rifle cracked to Flint's right, and the Comanche went down.

With Preacher Davis roaring commands all along the line of wagons, the men settled down. Reinforcements came across the river, and a fairly united front was presented to the Comanches. The wagons which had crossed were left unprotected in as much as the Comanches could cross only at the fording place, the water being fairly deep elsewhere.

George Sloane dropped down beside Flint, smiling yet

grim. Unlike some of the other men in the line he did not shoot wildly, but took careful aim before squeezing the trigger, and Flint noticed that his lead went home more often than not.

The Comanches had come in, fan-like, intending to squeeze the wagon outfit against the bank, but Preacher Davis' strategy in forming his bow out from the river had prevented this. The Indians were now racing back and forth in front of the wagons, sending in clouds of arrows, but they were beginning to take heavy losses as more and more guns were trained on them.

Boxes and barrels were tumbled down from some of the wagons to form barricades, and the men fought from shelter while the Comanches were out in the open. Few of the Indians were equipped with rifles.

"They don't like it now," George Sloane grinned, his face beginning to blacken from gunpowder smoke.

The Comanches were beginning to withdraw, leaving a number of their dead on the ground. Wounded and dying horses lay on the ground, screaming, flopping. Flint put a bullet through the head of one of them close by, putting it out of its misery.

"Hold your fire," Preacher Davis boomed. "They'll be coming back."

"They'll get more when they come back, too," George Sloane chuckled. He stood up. A Comanche arrow shot at random pierced his coat, then embedded itself in the ground in back of him.

Flint watched him walk back to pick up the arrow, and then return to crouch down beside Flint. He turned the arrow around and around in his fingers, a curious expression on his face, and then he said thoughtfully:

"This is how close a man can come to losing possibly the greatest fortune on the American continent."

"You have gold on the brain," Flint observed. "Come down to earth."

"I hope that fool, Carlita, had sense enough to keep her head down in the wagon where I left her," Sloane muttered. "I'd better have a look."

He ran off down the line of wagons while Flint crouched, watching the Comanches draw back to a ridge out of rifle shot. Fifteen or twenty of them had been shot, and a number more wounded, but they were still very dangerous, far outnumbering the caravan crew.

Preacher Davis was having a consultation with Samuel Slade as the men erected better barricades and dug in behind the wagons. The stock had been unyoked and driven across the river by now, and a dozen herders were watching them.

George Sloane came back, sat down beside Flint, and said, "She's all right. Afraid she's going to die. We're all going to die some day."

"She's valuable to you," Flint observed.

"More precious than gold," Sloane grinned. "I wouldn't take her weight in gold, Flint."

"That so," Flint murmured.

Sloane was looking out over the barricade. "What are they up to now?" he asked, changing the subject.

A party of the Indians was withdrawing from the main body, riding west along the river. There were about a hundred in this group, riding fast, leaving a cloud of dust behind them. Preacher Davis and Samuel Slade watched this group intently as they rode a half mile or so up the river.

"You think they're going to cross, Flint?" Sloane asked, "and then come up behind us?"

"We'll see," Flint muttered. "I don't like it, and neither does the Preacher."

The smaller Indian party suddenly cut down toward the river, splashing into the water, and Flint heard Davis' booming voice again, giving the orders. Men were sent

hurrying across the fording place now to reinforce the herdsmen and the wagons on that side.

"They're hitting at the wagons over there," Sloan growled. "Don't they ever get enough?"

"They're after the stock," Flint told him. "If they run off our stock we stay here."

Davis, himself, was going across the river with the reinforcements, driving hard through the water, shouting, urging his men on. He took with him about forty men, leaving the wagons on the original side poorly defended.

Flint watched the Indians crossing farther up, swimming their horses in places, scrambling out on opposite bank. When the entire party was across they hammered down toward the wagons.

George Sloane said, "Here come our friends again."

The larger body of Comanches stormed down from the ridge again, spreading out, screeching. Then the arrows started to fly. The Comanches came up close this time, riding to within thirty or forty yards of the wagons. One big buck came straight for Flint's barricade, riding a big black, obviously a stolen horse. The Comanche's chest was painted with blue stripes; there were yellow and black stripes across his face; his horse's head was painted white except for the eyes which were huge and staring, truly a ghost horse.

The buck on the black horse sent an arrow straight at them, and it shivered into the wood of the crate behind which Flint crouched, inches from his head. He fired, missed, and then heard George Sloane's rifle crack.

The Comanche seemed to break in the middle, his body falling loosely from his horse. As the black galloped away along the line of wagons he dragged the rider with him, one leg tied to the halter rope.

"There's one won't bother us," Sloane whooped.

They kept firing at the brown forms half-hidden behind the horses, firing and reloading, hearing the shooting

on the other side of the river. Once when Flint turned to look he saw the Comanches swing around the few wagons over there, but Davis' men were giving a good account of themselves as there were already a number of riderless ponies running loose.

The stock had been driven in among the wagons and were safe. Puffs of white gunsmoke lifted as the crew men kept up the fire at the hard-riding Comanches.

The wagons were holding, the withering firing never ceasing, and very shortly the main body of Comanches became disheartened, withdrawing, and taking with them as many of their dead as they could reach.

The men in the wagon corral with Flint started to yell deliriously, and a few of them even leaped over the flimsy barricades, ran out on the plains, and fired after the retreating Indians. One man went a little too far, and three bucks suddenly whirled their horses and tore back at him, one Comanche with a long, gleaming lance in his hand.

Samuel Slade, who had gone after these men, calling them back, lifted his rifle and shot hastily, dropping the buck with the lance. The other two whirled their ponies and fled away again, but the teamster who'd gone too far from the wagons came in white-faced, shaking.

"That one nearly lost his hair," George Sloane grinned. "He won't try that again."

The band of Comanches across the stream was also retreating, seeing that they could not break through the corral. Preacher Davis splashed back across the stream, leaving a strongly defended group of wagons on that side. As he came into the second wagon corral, the men cheered him lustily, and George Sloane said thoughtfully:

"I picked the right man for my expedition, Flint, didn't I?"

"Best choice you'll ever make in this world," Flint told him. "I'm wondering why he's going, though."

Sloane shrugged. "Evidently, you do not believe in the southwest trail to California, either."

"Damned if I know what I believe half the time," Flint grinned.

Sloane clapped him on the back. "But you're going," he chuckled, "and I like you for that, Flint."

Preacher Davis looked at the two of them searchingly as he rode past to see Slade, and Flint knew he was looking for casualties. He waved a hand to the big man to indicate that he was all right, and he saw Davis nod in acknowledgement.

The Comanches had retreated to the ridge again. The party which had crossed the river went back again to the other side, rejoining the main body. The Indians sat astride their ponies for some time, staring down at the wagon corral, and then turned and rode north in the direction from which they'd come.

It was a time for more cheers and rejoicing. A check of both corrals showed that only two men had been killed, and a half-dozen wounded, none of them seriously. The Comanches had lost forty or fifty dead, a serious loss to any war party.

The two dead men were buried where they had fallen, the wounded bandaged and made as comfortable as possible. Then the caravan moved on again, the remaining wagons crossing *Los Americanos*, joining with those on the other side.

George Sloane said to Flint as they got going, "I never thought the western Indian was as clever as that. The Comanches came up on us from the one vulnerable spot, and they hit us when crossing a stream. If it hadn't been for the Preacher getting those wagons into position on the north bank we may all have lost our hair."

"And you have nice hair," Flint told him.

Sloane grinned. "It looks better where it is than in a Comanche lodge. I can testify to that."

CHAPTER 9

THEY MOVED down the Cimarron to Cold Spring, made the crossing, stopping at McNee's Creek, at Rabbit Ear Creek, Round Mound, Point of Rocks, and Ocate, the first of the Mexican villages.

The days were long and monotonous, and the heat was with them constantly. In the smaller Mexican villages they had their first sight of the new American citizens brought into the Union after the annexation which followed the Mexican War.

They stopped at Rio Gallinas, San Miguel, and on a Saturday morning at eleven o'clock Samuel Slade's wagons, dusty, creaking, travel-stained, rolled past the rows of adobe walls that were as high as the head of a mule. They could hear the bells ringing in the Cathedral of Santa Fe.

From inside the *patios*, the black-eyed *señoritas* in gay shawls, bright skirts, and colored slippers, watched the Americans take possession of the sleepy New Mexican town. The poorer *rancheros* in tattered ponchos, wool hats, and sandals, stood along the side of the road, grin-

ning as the big heavily laden wagons rolled into the Plaza.

Slade had already sent emissaries ahead to rent concessions, stores, stalls, where he could set out his enormous quantities of goods from the States—his hardware, calico, cotton goods, cutlery, pots, pans, a thousand-and-one items manufactured in the United States, and for which the people of Santa Fe were willing to pay stupendous prices.

Little time was lost by Slade in establishing himself as the first trader down from Westport Landing. The Plaza hummed with excitement all afternoon. The teamsters were paid off before dusk, and they strolled down to "buck the tiger" in the various gambling halls, or to dance the *fandango* with the Mexican girls.

Flint walked off with Preacher Davis to look over the town. He'd been hoping these last few days that Maria Teresa's party would still be around, but a government official had informed him they'd pulled out five days before. They'd made excellent time from Westport.

Preacher Davis said, "The *vaqueros* traveled fast. They may already be home at this time."

"I'd been rather hoping," Flint admitted, "that they'd break down a few times before getting into Santa Fe."

"A young man dreams," the Preacher smiled, "but his dreams are not always practical. You shall see her."

Flint was not sure. It was a vast country below the border, and he'd already learned that the other side of Concepcion Range was still quite unsettled. Sloane would not want to be wasting time searching for a girl. He was after gold—vast quantities of it according to Carlita Fernandez.

Sloane and Carlita had already disappeared, and Flint had not even seen them depart from the wagons. Crowds of men, women, and children were swarming around the huge vehicles, getting under foot.

Flint was glad when he and the Preacher reached one of the quieter side streets of the Plaza. Flint said:

"When do you think Blaze Corcoran will arrive?"

"A few days," Davis stated, "at the most. He pushes his animals hard."

"It won't be for another week or so," Flint observed, "before all of Sloane's men are in Santa Fe, and ready to move out. Corcoran should be here before that happens."

The Preacher glanced at him curiously. "You still think Corcoran is trailing young Sloane?" he asked.

Flint nodded grimly. "Watch our back trail the week after we leave Santa Fe," he said. "I'll almost guarantee you'll find Corcoran there with his crew."

"Why should he follow Sloane?" the Preacher wanted to know.

"Because," Flint said slowly, "Sloane is following a gold trail, and not the trail to California."

"Gold," the Preacher said sonorously, "will lead a man to the pit of hell."

Flint found Sloane that night dickering with Samuel Slade in one of the Santa Fe *cantinas*. He saw money pass between the two men, and when Sloane invited him up to the bar for a drink he learned that the ten wagons had already been purchased for the trip.

Two more caravans coming in tomorrow afternoon," Sloane said as he lifted his glass to the light. "Fifteen of our boys with the caravans. I expect all of them in by the middle of next week. We shall be ready to leave Santa Fe in less than a week."

"You still feel," Flint asked, "that there is a trail to California by the southern route?"

George Sloane's brown eyes narrowed. "What makes you doubt it?" he asked.

"I've met no one who agrees with you," Flint said. "That reason enough?"

"Not for me," Sloane said. "You pulling out, Flint?"

Flint smiled at him. "I'd like to see it through," he said.

The Easterner took a deep breath. "If I understood you better, Flint," he said, "I might be able to tell you more. As it is I'd rather wait for the propitious moment."

"You feel that you need me," Flint grinned. "You're afraid to take that girl out alone west of Santa Fe with that crew of devils you have signed up."

"I need you," Sloane admitted, "and I need Preacher Davis to take me where I want to go."

"Otherwise you wouldn't bother with us," Flint added. "You'd take all dogs with you."

Sloane shrugged, and his white teeth flashed in a smile. "I kind of like you, Flint Raynor," he said. "I like your style."

"I started out for California," Flint said evenly. "I still intend to get there, Sloane. Remember that."

"Any man who will not change his plans for a better one," Sloane said, "is a damned fool, Flint, and I don't think you are."

"When you're ready to tell me your plans," Flint smiled, "I'll listen, but they'd better be good."

"They're good," Sloane assured him. "Do you think I'd be out here in this hell-hole if they weren't? Do you think I'm a pioneer?"

"No," Flint said, "you're not, and I never thought you were."

Blaze Corcoran's outfit rolled into Santa Fe two days later. The red-head had a newly healed cut on the right cheekbone. He rode into the Plaza where Flint was standing with Preacher Davis. He looked straight at Flint—hard, his bony face tight, his green eyes cold.

Dismounting, he pushed through the crowd swarming around the wagons, and he stepped up to the *cantina* outside of which Flint and the Preacher were standing.

He acted as if he were going to pass by without a word and go inside for a drink, but he didn't.

Flint puffed on his pipe, looking at the crowd in the Plaza. Corcoran stopped in front of him. He said tersely: "So you made it to Santa Fe. Thought you were headed for California?"

"I am," Flint said coolly. He offered no more information.

Corcoran spat. He took a Mexican cheroot from his shirt pocket, bit off the end. "You're a hell of a way off the Overland Trail, my friend," he said emotionlessly.

"I'll make it," Flint nodded. He watched Corcoran light up the cheroot and then he said, "Somebody bite that cheek, Corcoran?"

Corcoran's green eyes dilated. Flint could see that he was a man of pride, a man proud of his hard fists. He knew, too, that his guess had been correct. Corcoran was one of the men who had been at the Spanish girl's wagon.

"A coyote," Corcoran said slowly.

Flint was tightening his fists, looking straight into Corcoran's green eyes when he felt Preacher Davis' hand on his arm. Corcoran laughed at him and walked into the *cantina*.

It was three days before Flint saw the man again. George Sloane's entire crew had come in off the trail, and Sloane's wagons were already drawn up just outside the town, ready to move. Sloane had been busy purchasing supplies for the long overland trek down into Mexico and Flint had seen very little of him, and nothing whatsoever of Carlita Fernandez.

Standing alone at the end of the *El Toro Cantina* the night before they were to leave, Flint was surprised to feel a small hand on his arm. He'd been watching the dancers out on the floor, big, whooping American teamsters hustling small, dainty Mexican girls around the

room. He turned and looked down into the smiling face of Carlita Fernandez. She was dressed for the dance, her face rouged and painted, her mouth a patch of bright scarlet.

"You will dance with me," Carlita giggled.

"Never danced in my life," Flint admitted. "Hate to make a damn fool out of myself." He was wondering where she had come from, and whether Sloane knew she was here. Sloane was not in the *cantina*.

"It does not matter," Carlita grinned. "You will learn fast. All the *Americanos* do." She had Flint by both arms and was pulling him out on the floor. A big teamster at the bar stepped up behind Flint and gave him an encouraging push and a drunken whoop to start him off.

They went around the floor, bumping into other dancers, taking bumps in return. Flint said when they were out in the center of the dance floor. "We have not seen you, *señorita*, since arriving in Santa Fe."

"He will not let me go out," Carlita flared, "but tonight I have fooled him. I have come out the window."

They were moving around on the outside of the dance floor, coming back in the general direction of the bar, when Flint saw Carlita stare over his shoulder, the terror coming into her eyes. He bumped into a man standing a few feet from the bar, a glass of liquor in his hand. It was the red-headed Blaze Corcoran, ugly with a couple of drinks, grinning as he reached for Carlita's arm.

"So," Corcoran chuckled, "the charming Carlita so far from Westport. We shall have this dance, *señorita*?"

"No," Carlita gasped. "No—no!"

Blaze Corcoran was already pulling the girl away from Flint when Flint grasped the red-head's wrist and wrenched the arm away.

"Believe I'll finish out this dance, Corcoran," Flint drawled, "and maybe the next one, too." He saw some-

thing out of the corner of his eyes, which warned him to be on his guard.

Two men were standing near the side door, watching Corcoran intently as if waiting for a signal. Corcoran glanced in their direction before taking his first vicious punch at Flint's head.

Flint saw the blow coming. He'd been expecting a fight, but not that quickly. He tried to duck out of the way, but Corcoran's fist caught him a glancing blow on his left temple, knocking him against the bar.

The Mexican girls on the dance floor screamed. A big Missouri teamster whooped, "Fight—fight, boys!"

Corcoran tore after Flint, trying to reach him before he was able to straighten himself up. He came in, head low, arms outstretched with the intention of grappling Flint around the waist, and smashing him against the bar.

Flint came up with his left knee, driving it against Corcoran's solid chin, ripping at his face with both fists as it came up into the air. He swung away from the bar, eluding Corcoran's lunge, and he backed into a group of howling Americans who were already making bets on the outcome.

Blaze Corcoran came after him, scooping up an empty chair from a nearby card table. He hurled the chair straight at Flint's head. It smashed against the adobe wall as Flint ducked under the missile. Stepping to the bar, Corcoran snatched up an empty liquor bottle.

Carlita Fernandez screamed as the red-head leaped toward Flint, brandishing the bottle. Flint had acted quickly when he saw Corcoran go for the bottle. Reaching behind him, he picked up the battered chair, and tore one of the legs loose. He was grinning as he stepped in to meet Corcoran's rush. He swung the club as Corcoran aimed a murderous blow at his head with the bottle.

There was the crash of broken glass as the chair leg

struck the bottle. The shattered glass cut Corcoran's face in a half-dozen different places, and part of the club smashed his right fist. He let out a howl of pain, dropping the neck of the bottle which he still clutched in his hand.

Flint kicked out with his right boot, catching Corcoran in the shin. As the red-head doubled over and stumbled away, clutching at the bruised bone, Flint rapped him across the skull with the chair leg.

Corcoran's knees buckled, and Flint, dropping the club, moved in swinging both fists, knowing that the fight was now his. He backed Corcoran against the bar, hammering him in the face with heavy fists, jolting his head from side to side.

Corcoran fought back desperately, his teeth bared, blood dripping from his cut, battered face. He went to his knees, scrambled up by hauling on the edge of the bar, and then was knocked ten feet along the bar by another swing from Flint's right fist.

Flint went after him deliberately, coldly, knowing the code of the frontier, that a man would never stop fighting while he was still conscious. He was aiming another punch at Corcoran's jaw when he saw Carlita Fernandez staring at him, her mouth open to give him warning. Then the ceiling fell in.

Light exploded across Flint's vision. He could hear the sound as of a heavy object smashed against the back of his skull, driving him to his knees. A terrible weakness came over him, and he felt the hot blood flowing down the back of his neck into the collar of his shirt.

On his knees, lacking the strength to get up, he saw Corcoran gathering his strength for a rush at him. Corcoran's hard face was twisted in bloody hatred as he stumbled forward, fists balled.

One of the two men Flint had seen at the door stepped around, a Colt gun in his hand, waving it at the cursing

crowd, keeping them back if any contemplated interfering.

Flint tried to get his hands up to block Corcoran's first vicious punch at his face. He managed to turn his head as Corcoran hit him while he was still on his knees. The fist caught him above the left eye, ripping open the eyebrow, sending the blood streaming across his eye.

Rolling over, Flint tried to get up and defend himself. Corcoran was moving around, aiming a kick at his face. It was then that Flint saw the giant in buckskin driving through the crowd, towering head and shoulders above even the tallest man in the room.

Preacher Davis' wide face was livid with rage. He was truly the avenging angel of the Lord, scattering men right and left as if they were chaff, reaching for the man with the gun.

Flint forgot Blaze Corcoran. He stared in awe as the Preacher grasped his man with two powerful hands, lifted him high into the air. The man with the gun let out a yell as he flew through the air over the bar. His body struck the cracked, fly-specked mirror, shattering the glass into a thousand pieces.

Blaze Corcoran swung around. He tried to scramble back, reaching for another chair with which to ward off the attack, but Preacher Davis was on him like a great cat, moving across the room in big strides, his moccasined feet making no sounds on the floor.

Corcoran threw a blow at the Preacher's face, but Davis did not seem to feel it. He hit Corcoran with a rush, driving him back into the crowd, knocking down at least six men who tried to scramble wildly out of the way.

Corcoran's feet went up into the air, and then his body rose. Preacher Davis held him aloft and then smashed him down against the floor with such force that

the dance hall shook. Corcoran screamed just before he went unconscious.

He was lifted again, high overhead, carried toward the two swinging doors, and then hurled through as if he were a ragdoll. His two-hundred-pound body struck the doors, jerking them open, tearing the right door from the hinges.

Flint heard the sickening thud outside as Corcoran's body hit the dirt. A hushed silence had fallen over the big room as Davis launched his one-man fight, and the silence still held as the giant stalked back across the room and bent down beside Flint, lifting him to his feet. He stood there, his gaunt, homely face expressionless, and he said, "All bets off."

A big teamster was saying fervently, "Damn if the Preacher ain't got the strength o' the Lord in them arms. Reckon I'd rather stand up agin the whole damned Comanche nation than meet the Preacher when he's got his dander up."

Davis sat Flint down in one of the chairs. A bucket of water and towels were brought in, and the big man started to bathe the blood from Flint's face.

He was saying softly, "Man is born to trouble."

"Reckon I wouldn't like too much of this kind, Preacher," Flint said ruefully. "My head feels as if it were cracked open."

Flint looked for Carlita Fernandez in the crowd, but didn't see her. Looking around the room he finally caught a glimpse of the girl standing in an alcove her back to the wall. She was looking at a man in front of her, a man with thick, brown, curling hair. His back was turned, but Flint recognized George Sloane.

Flint saw the terror in the girl's eyes as she stared into Sloane's face, and then Sloane's hand lashed out, smashing her full across the mouth. She staggered back along the wall of the alcove, and Flint's vision was

blocked as several men moved in front of him. When they passed on, and he could see into the alcove again, both Sloane and the girl were gone.

Preacher Davis was murmuring, "Man that is born of woman is of few days and full of trouble. He cometh forth like a flower, and is cut down; he fleeth also as a shadow and continueth not."

"How is that cut in my head?" Flint asked him.

"You'll have a headache in the morning," the Preacher told him, "but by noon you will be as well as ever." He added softly, "So it was Corcoran again?"

"Watch our back trail tomorrow," Flint said, "you'll find Corcoran on it."

"Why?" Davis asked.

Flint smiled grimly. "You're a kind of prophet, Preacher," he said. "You tell me."

CHAPTER 10

THEY PULLED OUT of Santa Fe at dawn, moving due west toward the headwaters of the Rio Grande. George Sloane had had his crew working on the wagons, making whatever repairs were necessary, tightening tire irons, inserting new axles when the old ones were found to be in bad shape.

The Pittsburghs had already come eight-hundred-odd miles from Westport Landing, and they were not in too

good shape. The mules Sloane had purchased were cast-off animals the traders did not want to take back with them to Westport on the return trip. Everything pointed to the fact that Sloane was stretching out a sizeable stake to equip this party, putting everything he had into one venture, which if it failed would find him stranded.

Carlita Fernandez was with the party, occupying the same wagon she had used on the trip from Westport. Flint noticed that she continued to stay close to the wagon at all times, even eating inside.

She was strangely subdued after the affair in the *cantina* with Corcoran. She spoke very little with Sloane, and she made no attempt to come near Flint again, for which fact Flint was very glad.

The hard-bitten crew stared at her rudely when she came out on one occasion when they had stopped for the midday rest period and meal. A rat-faced little man with a black beard grinned at her openly, and then winked at one of the other men.

George Sloane stood by the cook's fire, watching, saying nothing, a thin smile on his face. When the men were eating and Carlita had gone back into the wagon, he said casually, "Boys, we're going on a long and possibly dangerous journey. Let's not have any trouble among ourselves. I'd like you gentlemen to stay away from the wagon. Is that clear?"

The men stared at him, measuring him. Some of them grinned. He was an Easterner. He sounded and acted like an Easterner. One man said sourly, "An' what if we don't, mister?"

"You might find yourself dead," Sloane smiled at him. "That would not be so pleasant."

The other men guffawed, and the fellow who had raised the question looked sheepish, but not particularly frightened. He was a pockmarked man with a scraggly beard, and small, yellowish eyes. Flint noticed that he was still

glancing toward the wagon when Sloane drifted off with his tin plate and coffee cup.

Camp was made that night along the Rio Grande, the wagons being corraled close to the water, the mules grazing nearby. Preacher Davis, who had been at the head of the column most of the day, had left late in the afternoon to ride over the back trail.

He came in after dark, stepping up to one of the fires for his supper. He was sitting on the ground, Indian fashion, gulping down hot coffee, consuming a vast quantity of bacons, beans, and sour-dough biscuits, when Flint came over.

The Preacher looked at him, cleared his throat, and said, "They're coming—fifteen wagons, mule-driven for speed, seventy-five men. Corcoran's crew is tougher than ours."

"You think they'll attack us?" Flint asked him.

Davis shrugged. "I don't believe Blaze Corcoran is following another man's trail to California," he said. "If he wanted to go there he'd make his own trail. He's after something else, and he's following Sloane's wagons for that reason."

"Gold?" Flint smiled.

"Your gold and your silver is cankered," the Preacher murmured, "and the rust of them shall be a witness against you, and shall eat your flesh as if it were fire."

"Not my flesh," George Sloane smiled as he came into the firelight. "Your predictions are not always true, Reverend."

"The word of God," Preacher Davis stated mildly, "is irrevocable. As the partridge sitteth on eggs and hatcheth them not, so he that getteth riches, and not by right, shall leave them in the midst of his days, at his end shall be a fool."

"Saith the prophet Jeremiah," George Sloane grinned. "Now, what about Corcoran, Reverend?"

"He's camped five miles behind us," Davis said.

"Why?" Flint asked coldly.

Sloane smiled. "The trails to California are free," he stated. "A man can pick his own."

"No man in his right mind would follow our trail," Flint observed, "and you know it."

"Corcoran," Preacher Davis said evenly, "can wipe out this crew any time he wants to, Sloane. He has hired gun hands working for him. Your men are the dregs of Westport. They'll run at the first sign of trouble."

"The best I could afford," Sloane smiled. "But Corcoran won't wipe us out, Reverend. I'll guarantee that."

"I'd give a dollar," Flint said thoughtfully, "to know why."

"You'll find out," Sloane said, "if Corcoran comes close enough to us."

They set double guards that night, drawing in the mules, tethering them close to the wagons. Flint was on guard duty from nine o'clock until midnight. He was coming in from his position at the far edge of the mule herd when the single shot sounded near one of the wagons.

The guard who had just relieved him yelled, "What in hell was that Raynor?"

Flint moved toward the wagons at a sharp trot, sliding the Colt gun out of the holster as he ran. The cook's fire had nearly died down, but someone was throwing dry brush on it, bringing it to new life.

Men who had been sleeping around the fire and under the wagons, scrambled up, reaching for weapons. They stared around, sleepy-eyed, hearing no more shots, seeing nothing. Then Flint spotted Sloane standing a few yards from Carlita Fernandez's wagon, calmly ejecting a spent cartridge shell. There was a huddled shape on the ground, sprawled between the two wheels where he had fallen.

A man was saying, "That's Nash Benville got it. Reckon he was gettin' too close to the girl's wagon."

Sloane came into the firelight, and as the yellow light illumined his face Flint saw the hard, cold lines. Men had dragged Benville's body into the light and rolled it over. Flint saw the bullet hole between his eyes. He saw, too, the new respect on the faces of the crew. The man killed was the little man with the pockmarks and the yellowish eyes.

"Reckon Nash wanted to see if you meant what you said, Mr. Sloane," one man muttered. "He found out."

"I meant it," Sloane said softly. "It goes for every one in this crew who has the idea that he can disobey orders. I've put a lot of money into this outfit, and I don't intend to see it kicked away because some of you are fools." He paused, and they were listening silently. He said slowly, "Every man here stands to make himself rich if he'll keep his head and let me do the thinking."

Flint watched them standing around the fire. One man said, "You're the boss, Sloane. We told you we'd go where in hell you took us, an' we're goin'."

"If any man wants to turn back," Sloane said, "he can have a horse and pull out tonight." He waited, but no one spoke. Then he went up to the fire and poured himself a cup of coffee from the pot the cook had left for the night guards.

Flint looked down at the dead Nash Benville. He moved away and sat on a rock and accepted the cup George Sloane poured for him. The Easterner said quietly:

"You didn't think I'd kill him, did you?"

"I wasn't sure," Flint admitted. "I always knew you were tougher than you looked."

Sloane shrugged. "A man doesn't have to be a Westerner to be tough," he said. "I've known men in the East who

would make your Western killers look like praying brothers."

"That might be true," Flint nodded. He sipped his coffee and waited for George Sloane to come to the point, knowing that the man had something to say to him tonight.

"These other fools," Sloane said softly, "I stall along with promises, and I keep them thinking. I'm not fooling you, Raynor."

"You'd damn well better not," Flint said.

"I spotted your type the moment I saw you," Sloane went on. "I need a man who is tough and who is not a fool. I think you're that man, Flint."

"Come to it," Flint called coldly. He tossed away the remnants of the coffee, and he dangled the empty cup from his index finger as he waited for Sloane to go on.

"I'm after gold," Sloane said slowly, "the kind of gold that's already dug and waiting for a man—enough of it to make me a king if I wanted to be one."

Flint nodded, "I didn't think you were fool enough to go to California to dig it," he said. "You'll never have callouses on those smooth hands as long as you have brains."

"I want to cut you in on a third share of it," George Sloane said smoothly. "I'd like to give the Reverend another third, but gold doesn't mean anything to him. He's liable to give it to filthy Indians he thinks he's converted."

"Whatever the Preacher does with his money," Flint observed, "I'll guarantee he uses it more wisely than you."

Sloane's smile broadened. "And that's probably true," he admitted, "and besides the point. I've come to the conclusion, however, that the Reverend Davis will not take to my little plan to deprive the dead of something which can do them no apparent good, but which will set me up as the richest man in the United States."

"Deprive the dead?" Flint repeated slowly.

"The poor dead *padres*," George Sloane almost whispered, "of the Mission San Sebastian del Sur, one of the oldest of the Spanish missions in northern Mexico. The gold is stacked up in bars ten feet high, filling a long tunnel—not gold ore which you have to dig until your back is broken, and then sift out ounce by ounce, but solid bullion, dug centuries ago by hundreds and hundreds of poor Indians. Enough bullion to build another Spanish Armada to send against England; sufficient bullion to set old Spain up as the most powerful nation in the world even after the defeat of the Armada—but it never got there."

Sloane's brown eyes were glittering strangely in the firelight as he spoke. He was leaning forward a little, gesturing with his hands, something he never did, and which indicated his intense excitement.

Watching him, listening to him, Flint saw the same thing in his eyes that he'd seen in the eyes of hundreds of men in St. Louis, and while coming up the Missouri to Westport: men who'd been bitten by the gold bug. It was painted across their faces, and it tainted their souls. Seeing it in George Sloane, Flint was conscious of a vague regret. In a way he'd come to like the handsome Easterner. Sloane was as hard as granite, as cold as ice, beneath his easy exterior, but he possessed likeable qualities. He was friendly; he was democratic; he could laugh and smile at anything, and he took hardships with the best of men. The gold lust took something away from him.

"I know where that gold is," George Sloane was saying tensely. "I think—" He stopped very suddenly and listened. Flint heard it, too, against the stillness of the night, the distant pounding of horses' hoofs, coming toward them very rapidly.

A gun banged, and then one of the sentinels let out a warning yell. A single horseman pounded into the en-

closure, sliding from the saddle. It was Preacher Davis. There were more shots, more yells.

Davis said quietly, "Corcoran's headed this way with his outfit."

The men inside the enclosure started to run for guns. George Sloane stopped them with a few words.

"Everybody sit down by the fire," he ordered. "Drop your guns."

Flint stared at him. Preacher Davis, who had been running the heavy logging chain across the enclosure opening, stopped and turned around slowly.

"I know what you're thinking," Sloane said quietly. "They outnumber us, and they're not Indians who hit and run away. These are white men. If we chase them off tonight, they'll be back tomorrow night or the night after. They'll keep coming back, and some night we won't be ready for them."

"What do you figure on doing?" Flint asked him.

"Let them come in," Sloane smiled coldly. "I want to talk to Corcoran."

They could hear the riders pounding in closer, and then one of the night herders stumbled in, panting, the terror in his eyes.

"Hundreds of 'em!" he yelled. "They run the damned mules off."

"Everybody down," Sloane ordered. "Build up the fires."

Brush was thrown across the fires and light came into the enclosure. Flint watched Sloane walk toward Carlita Fernandez's wagon. He came back a few moments later, holding the girl by the arm. She was shaking with terror.

Corcoran's riders stormed out of the night, riding in a wide circle around the enclosure, firing wildly, expecting return fire. But no guns were fired by the waiting men.

George Sloane yelled, "Hold it up, Corcoran. Hold it up!"

He made himself heard after a few moments despite the vicious spat of rifles.

A man called gruffly when the guns stopped, "Hold that damned fire. See what he wants."

Out beyond the light of the enclosure fires, the riders stopped. As he sat on the ground with the other men Flint heard Blaze Corcoran's harsh voice, the bullets whining over their heads, ripping into the wagons. One man had been struck with a bullet, but it was only a flesh wound, and he was cursing as he tried to bandage his arm with a piece of his shirt.

Blaze Corcoran roared, "You want any more of this, Sloane?"

"Come on in," Sloane invited. "I want to talk." He gripped Carlita Fernandez's arm and held her next to him.

Corcoran laughed coldly, "We come in," he snapped, "and you shoot every damned one of us out of the saddles. You think I'm crazy, Sloane."

"Send a man in," Sloane invited. "You'll find every one of my boys on the ground. We're not fighting."

There were a few moments of silence, and then a single rider trotted toward the opening of the enclosure. He rode into the light and sat there, staring at the man sitting on the ground. Then he spat tobacco juice, and called loudly,

"All right, Blaze. Come on in. . ."

CHAPTER 11

SWIFTLY, riders moved in, Blaze Corcoran in the lead. When they had crowded through the narrow opening to the wagon corral, Sloane called:

"That's far enough, Corcoran."

Blaze Corcoran sat astride his big buckskin horse, staring at Sloane and at the girl. His eyes flitted to the men on the ground, at Flint, and at Preacher Davis. The Preacher sat with his rifle across his knees and stared into the flames.

Flint heard the Preacher suddenly draw in his breath. Davis had turned his head slightly and was looking at Sloane a half-dozen yards away. Then Flint saw it, too. The Easterner had a gun in his hand, the muzzle of the gun pressed against the Mexican girl's back.

"What do you want, Corcoran?" Sloane asked gently.

"You know damned well what I want," Corcoran snapped. "Send her over here and I'll return your mules. You can head back to Sante Fe in the morning. There won't be a man hurt."

Sloane laughed, a metallic ring to his voice. He said, "How do you want her, Corcoran, dead or alive?" He pushed the girl around then, and Flint could see that she was ready to faint. She was trembling violently, her face

ghastly against the red light of the fire. Sloane turned her so that Blaze Corcoran could see the gun.

Corcoran's lower jaw drooped. He said slowly, "You're not killing her, Sloane. You'd be a damned fool."

"I'll kill her before you get her," Sloane murmured. "Try me."

Corcoran sat astride the horse, staring at the Easterner. He moistened his thin, brutal lips. The buckskin, nervous, moved a step forward. Flint heard the hammer of Sloane's gun click. Every man inside the enclosure heard it.

A man behind Corcoran said tersely, "Damn his soul! He ain't killin' a woman, is he, Blaze?"

There was no answer to the question. The fire crackled merrily, and sparks flew up into the night sky. There were no sounds for several long seconds. Sloane stood where he was, holding up the girl with one hand, the gun pressed into her back, the hammer drawn back.

Blaze Corcoran's voice drifted toward him, taut with anger and frustration. He said, "I'm open for a deal, Sloane."

"Here's the deal," Sloane grinned. "Draw your dogs off, Corcoran. Don't try to raid my wagons again, and return my mules before morning. If you don't, you'll find this girl's body when you come to our campsite."

Corcoran cursed him until he was out of breath. Then, he snarled, "How far do you think you'll get after you kill her?"

"I might make a pretty good fight of it," Sloane told him coolly. "But either way it turns out, this girl dead won't do you any good. Isn't that true?"

"She won't do you no damned good either," Corcoran growled.

"That might be true," Sloane grinned, "and it might not be. Maybe I don't need her any more, but you do."

Baffled, Corcoran glared at him, an insane rage coming

into his green eyes. Before he could speak, Sloane said to him:

"Now get out of my camp, and send the mules back."

"You'll never leave this country alive," Corcoran promised. "I'll track you from here to South America if I have to."

"Don't forget the mules," Sloane said. "I need them."

Flint watched Blaze Corcoran turn his horse and ride through the crowd of men. They followed him, and he could hear the thud of the hoofs dying out in the distance.

Sloane relaxed his grip on Carlita Fernández, and she fell in a heap at his feet. Putting the gun into the holster, he picked her up and carried her to the wagon.

Preacher Davis murmured, "The day of the Lord cometh with wrath and fierce anger; he shall destroy the sinners thereof out of the land."

Sloane came back, whistling softly. He said to Flint, whom he now seemed to regard as second in command, "Set a double guard tonight, Raynor. We shall be moving at dawn."

"Without mules?" Flint asked him.

"We shall have mules," Sloane chuckled.

Flint put out the extra guards. When he returned he noticed that Preacher Davis was gone, and that Sloane was again sitting on the wagon tongue, smoking a cigarillo, evidently waiting for him.

"A close call," Flint said. "If it hadn't been for the girl you'd have been dead."

"If it hadn't been for Carlita," Sloane observed, "I damn well wouldn't be out here to begin with."

"I'll hear the rest of it," Flint said.

"Carlita Fernandez," Sloane said, "is the great granddaughter of an old peon retainer who worked at the Mission San Sebastian del Sur in the Mexican province of Sonora. The old *padres* had established the Mission in about 1540. It was a big one, and they were led to an

amazing gold strike by Yacqui Indians who considered the stuff useless."

Sloane flicked ash from the cigarillo, and adjusted himself on the wagon tongue. He went on quietly, "They must have hit the mother lode because it is evidently the richest strike ever made on the continent. The *padres* with the help of hundreds of Yacquis worked the mines, turning the stuff into bullion for shipment back to Mexico City, and then to Spain. I learned this much from men with whom I spoke back in Westport, after I'd heard Carlita's story. The 'Lost Padre Mine' is a legend in this country.

"I've heard talk of it," Flint nodded, "on the boat. That's the only kind of talk you hear on boats these days."

"Apparently, none of the gold had been shipped from the mine," Sloane went on, "when there was a rebellion of the Indians. Either that, or a big raid by Apaches from the north. No one seems to know the details. The 'Lost Padre Mine' was sealed up. All of the *padres* were murdered by Indians, and the Mission destroyed. A new one has been built, which is now about a hundred and fifty years old, but no one was ever able to locate the mine, all traces of it having been cleverly concealed by the *padres*. I guess the converted Indians who had worked the mine were either murdered or scattered after the catastrophe."

"And men have been looking for it ever since," Flint added. "Some men have doubted that the mine ever existed, or that it is as rich as it was supposed to be."

"Carlita Fernandez knows where it is," Sloane said slowly. "Do you hear that?"

"I wouldn't believe her story too quickly," Flint murmured.

"No," Sloane shook his head vigorously. "She lacks the imagination to invent something like this. I believe every word of it. She was brought up on the rich *hacienda* of Don Justo Almazon, who owns vast quantities of land

adjoining the new Mission of San Sebastian del Sur. Carlita's folks were peons, living at the *hacienda*, working for Don Justo."

Flint was sitting up straight, staring at him. He said slowly, "Don Justo Almazon?"

Sloane looked at him. "Is that name familiar to you?" he asked queerly.

"The girl I met on the trail," Flint said quietly, "the girl with the *vaqueros*. Her father is Don Justo Almazon. She was returning to the *hacienda* after attending school in the States."

Sloane stared at him, unbelievably. Then he took the cigarillo from his mouth and tossed it away angrily. He said, with bitterness in his voice, "Here we are trying to blaze a wagon trail from Santa Fe west through Sonora when all we had to do was follow this girl and the *vaqueros* directly to the *hacienda*. I wish I had known this, Flint."

"You kept your own secrets damned well," Flint observed. "You'd have saved yourself a lot of trouble if you'd have told me about Don Justo Almazon before."

"Too late now," Sloane scowled. "The Preacher will find the way to the Concepcion Range, and Carlita says she can direct us thereafter." He scratched his chin thoughtfully. "So the girl is the daughter of Don Justo," he murmured.

"What about Carlita?" Flint said evenly.

Sloane grinned. "Her great grandfather," he said, "who may have been over a hundred years old at the time, seemed to know where the mine was. He may have learned its location years before from one of the Indian workers who hadn't been killed. At any rate Carlita, when she was twelve years, followed the old man out into the hills, probably out of curiosity. He led her to the mine which is on Don Justo's grant. It's in wild mountainous country a few miles north of the *hacienda*, Carlita entered

the hole after the old man left. She says she saw the gold, and she described it accurately. It filled the whole tunnel, twenty-five yards long, ten feet high."

"Didn't she tell Don Justo about it?" Flint asked incredulously.

"She was captured by a passing band of Apaches," Sloane explained, "who took her north, kept her for a while, and then traded her to another tribe. She lived with the Indians for some years as a slave, being traded back and forth, and then a Pawnee band got possession of her and took her to Santa Fe."

"Where Blaze Corcoran bought her," Flint said, "and learned the story of the mine."

"She was deathly afraid of Corcoran," Sloane said. "She liked him in the beginning, telling him she was the daughter of Don Justo, and for that reason Corcoran bought her. When he discovered that she was lying, he beat her within an inch of her life. She tried to tell him the story of the lost mine, but he evidently thought she was lying again. She managed to run away, and it was probably some time after that when Corcoran heard the details of the 'Lost Padre Mine,' and began to search for Carlita. He's positive now that she was speaking the truth then, and that she can lead him to the richest gold deposit in America."

"And you met Carlita in Westport," Flint said. "Why didn't she try to get back home again?"

Sloane shrugged. "She was a young girl and she drifted from town to town in New Mexico. She liked Santa Fe, and she liked to dance. Besides, there is no trail from Santa Fe to the Mission San Sebastian del Sur, and the *hacienda* of Don Justo. She turned up in Westport with a party of traders, and there I met her. When she told me the story of the mine, we made a deal to go back together."

"And then Corcoran spotted her again," Flint said. "He has made two attempts already to kidnap her."

"Both of which you foiled," Sloane smiled. "I owe you much, Flint Raynor."

"You never had any intention of going to California," Flint said thoughtfully. "You don't give a damn about the new route. You're only interested in getting down to the *hacienda* of Don Justo Almazon. You organized a regular caravan because you knew one man, or even a small party, would have a hard time of it getting through unknown country."

George Sloane grimaced. "Eventually," he said, "we shall all reach California up through one of the mountain passes. The old *padres* went that way from Mexico to California, and my wagons will follow their trail."

"Loaded down with the old *padres'* gold," Flint added.

"One third of which will go to you," Sloane said, "because I like you, and because you've helped me. I have every intention of rewarding the crew, also. Every last son will make more with me than he could have made going straight to the American River and digging his fool head off for a century."

"You don't have the gold yet," Flint pointed out, "and you do have Corcoran on your trail. He's stronger than you are. If he returns your mules, he'll follow you all the way to the *hacienda*, wait until you've loaded your gold, if it's there, and then he'll jump you."

"I'll worry about Corcoran," Sloane said smoothly, "when the time comes to worry. I'll have something ready for him," He was watching Flint's face closely as he spoke, and he said, "What are you thinking about now?"

"I started out for California," Flint said evenly. "I still figure on getting there."

Sloane got up, grinned, and slapped Flint's shoulder. As he walked toward his wagon, he called back over his shoulder, "We leave at dawn, *segundo*."

When Flint awoke an hour before dawn he heard the night herders bringing the mules in. Sloane was watching them, a broad smile on his face.

Flint said to Preacher Davis, "So Corcoran was licked last night?"

"He won't stay licked," Davis said grimly. "He'll dog us every step of the way to California." The big mountain man looked at his hands. "If we're going to California," he added shrewdly.

"We're going there," Flint told him, "but we're stopping off on the way to pick up the gold of the 'Lost Padre Mine'."

"The Lost Padre," Davis murmured. "I should have known. The deserts north and south of the Mission San Sebastian del Sur are spotted with the bones of men who have sought the 'Lost Padre Mine'."

"George Sloane," Flint smiled, "doesn't figure on leaving his bones on those deserts, Preacher."

"No man knoweth," Davis said softly, "when the end cometh. It is appointed unto men once to die."

CHAPTER 12

THEY WERE off again at dawn, following the course of the Rio Grande, following it day after day to the Mexican border. They made the crossing, Preacher Davis finding the fording place for them.

Day after day, the wagons rolled south and west, over rolling plains, over broken, rocky country where they had

innumerable breakdowns. The hot sun burned them to a crisp. Supplies started to run out, and the grass gave way to desert. Mules fell in the traces, were cut out, and shot, but the wagons went on, George Sloane riding at the head of the column, Preacher Davis roaming far ahead, finding a trail with unerring accuracy.

The third week out of Santa Fe they saw mountains again, the lower stretches of the Rockies, and Davis went ahead to find the passes. Sometimes he was gone for a day or two at a time, but when he came back he had the route marked for them, and usually he had fresh meat waiting when they came up.

"Without the Preacher," Sloane said sincerely, "we would be dead in three days. I wonder how your *vaqueros* and the beautiful *señorita* got through, Flint."

"They won't be pulling broken-down wagons with broken-down mules," Flint said, "and they'll know where they are going."

"I apologize for my lack of foresight," Sloane said. "I did not realize this country was so vast. It looks considerably smaller on a map. Besides," he added, "I had no more money. . . . This is a gamble, Flint."

"Your gamble," Flint said dryly, "not mine, Sloane. I started with nothing. I expect to get the same."

Sloane laughed merrily. "You are a good road companion," he chuckled. "You keep me out of the clouds."

Preacher Davis took them into the mountains, following the courses of the small streams which ran into the Mexican rivers, the Rio Casas Grandes, the Rio Bavispe, the Rio Nacozari.

They were far north of the Mexican city of Chihuahua to which occasional caravans traveled from Santa Fe, and they were breaking new trails all the way. Davis found the water when they needed it; the Preacher brought in fresh meat in a country where they saw no game. The Preacher blazed the trails through the rough, mountainous country,

showing the disgruntled, beaten men how to work wagons down steep inclines with ropes snubbed around strong trees. Once they even unloaded the wagons and lowered them down a forty-foot precipice when no trail could be found.

They saw cattle grazing on the slopes the third week after leaving the Rio Grande, and then they entered a tiny Mexican village, the peons and the *rancheros* staring at them in amazement—the first American caravan to enter this part of the country.

They were able to purchase some beans and corn and fresh vegetables, and when they left the village they drove with them three steers.

George Sloane said to Flint ruefully, "That's the last of it until we reach the 'Lost Padre Mine'."

"The Preacher will find you food in the pit of hell," Flint said. "Your luck is still holding out."

Time after time, Davis went back over their trail, and always when he returned his face was grim.

"He is still with us?" Flint asked him.

"He'll stay with us," the Preacher said tersely.

"Corcoran is a lucky man," Flint observed, "having you break trail for him, Preacher. He'd have been lost a dozen times by now."

They passed through two more villages, and then Carlita Fernandez became highly excited. Flint saw her sitting on the wagon seat one afternoon as they were moving over the brow of a hill. She was pointing toward a distant range of mountains, speaking in Spanish to Sloane who rode beside the wagon.

Sloane stared at the blue mountains, and then glanced back at Flint. He was thin now, and he looked ten years older than when he had left Westport earlier in the summer. His clothes were no longer trim—more often than not he had a stubble of brown beard on his face like the other men—but he still retained that cheerful grin, and he was

considerate of men and animals, never pushing them too hard, stopping for frequent rests.

He came over to Flint when they stopped that night, and he said, nodding toward the mountains, "There it is—the Concepcion Range. The *hacienda* of Don Justo is on the other side of the mountains. We should be there in a few days at the most,"

"You intend to stop there?" Flint asked him.

Sloane grinned. "If I don't," he said, "you probably will, so we'd better. We might be able to buy supplies from Don Justo, along with mules."

"On credit?" Flint asked him.

"We won't need credit in a few days," Sloane said softly. "We can buy out Don Justo Almazon, himself," He added, "These Mexican *rancheros* are usually very hospitable. He'll probably insist that we stay with him anyway."

Flint stood with his hands on his hips, staring at the distant mountains. He said quietly, "He might not be so hospitable when he learns that you've come after his gold."

"His gold?" Sloane repeated curiously.

"The 'Lost Padre Mine'," Flint pointed out, "is on Don Justo's grant. Whose gold does that make it?"

"The old *padres*," Sloane said softly, "and then mine. I'll answer to the *padres* in due time."

"What if Don Justo objects?" Flint asked him.

"He will not object," Sloane scowled, "to something of which he is not aware. I intend to leave the *hacienda* within a few days, paying for our supplies with a small quantity of the gold taken from the mine. We'll pick up the rest of the bullion on the way out, and then set our little trap for Blaze Corcoran, who will be on our trail. When we are through with him, we continue on to California, and then back around the Horn to home. As the Reverend Davis would say—God willing."

"Reckon I'd look on that as stealing," Flint said.

George Sloane turned to stare at him, a grim expression sliding over his face. He said softly, "I believe the Reverend Davis has had too great an influence on you, Flint. Would you expect me to cut Don Justo in on this gold, also? You forget I have promised to give you a third. I must take care of fifty boys with this outfit, as well as Carlita. No matter how much bullion is in that tunnel, I don't intend to cut in every son in the country."

"If the gold is on Don Justo's land," Flint said quietly, "I believe he should be considered."

"I'll consider him," Sloane said tersely, "but not with cash, even if he is Maria Teresa's father. I understand he's well fixed, himself."

"I'll have no part of the business," Flint said. "I signed up only to go to California on this trip."

The unbelief showed in Sloane's brown eyes. "Such damnable honesty," he muttered, "is beyond my comprehension. You'll change your mind, Flint, when you see the real stuff, and when you realize what that gold will buy you back in the States: carriages, and mansions, and clothes, and everything your heart desires."

"It won't buy Preacher Davis," Flint said, "and it won't buy me."

Sloane shook his head as he walked off. "We'll talk about it later," he said.

They passed big herds of cattle the second day as they were going through the low valleys of the Concepcion Range. Mexican *vaqueros* watched them from a distance, and one of them came over to speak with Sloane. The vast size of the herds seemed to impress Sloane. He said softly to Flint:

"Looking at this stock, do you still think Don Justo needs our bullion?"

Flint didn't say anything.

It was late afternoon the next day that they spotted

the distant white walls of the *hacienda* as they came up over a swell on the other side of the Range. They had passed more cattle grazing on the lush grass.

A band of *vaqueros* galloped out to meet them, riding around the ten battered wagons as they approached the gate of the *hacienda*. Scores of people, Indians, mestizos, Mexican peons, crowded around the gate as Sloane corraled his wagons on a level spot outside the ten-foot-high adobe wall.

Carlita Fernandez, sitting upon the wagon seat, screeched excitedly to some of the spectators, and they stared back at her, evidently puzzled, not recognizing this slim, beautiful girl as the child who had been abducted many years before by the Apaches.

Flint, looking anxiously through the crowd, saw a slim, white-haired man with a white goatee come through the crowd. He was richly dressed in velvet, knee-length breeches, a gold sash around his waist.

The peons at the gate bowed low as the white-haired man went past them, smiling benignly. George Sloane, who had stopped near Flint's wagon, whispered:

"That'll be Don Justo."

Don Justo came straight up to Sloane, bowed politely, and then held out his hand. He said in perfect, well-modulated English, "Welcome, sir, to the *hacienda*."

Sloane smiled. "I did not expect to find a man out in this country speaking excellent English," he said.

"I have lived in the States for some time," Don Justo told him, and in England. My *vaqueros* spotted you several days ago, *señor*, so this is not exactly a surprise. May I invite you and your friends as my guests for dinner tonight?"

"A privilege," Sloane murmured, "and a pleasure. May I present my *segundo*, Flint Raynor, and the Reverend Davis of Westport. I am George Sloane of New York."

Don Justo Almazon turned to look up at the giant Davis

who wore buckskin, and sat astride his horse a few yards away. He said, "It is a very great privilege to have a man of the faith at my table, Reverend."

Don Justo's skin was smooth and brown, despite his age. His beard and eyebrows were white, but his eyes strangely enough blue. Flint learned later that his mother had been an English woman.

"I should be happy," the Preacher said solemnly, "to say grace at the table of a man of whom I have heard much in other parts of Mexico."

Don Justo bowed again. "The hospitality of the *hacienda* is extended to you and your party, *Señor* Sloane, as long as you care to stay with us. I need not say that I am considerably surprised to discover an American wagon train so far from the regular overland routes, even though my daughter has informed me a train was enroute this way." He glanced at Flint again, and he said warmly, "I have neglected to thank you, *Señor* Raynor, for your kindness to my daughter in Westport."

"My pleasure," Flint said. He had been looking for her in the crowd.

"One of my intentions," Sloane was saying, "was to blaze a new overland trail to California via the southern route, a trail which would circumvent the Sierra Nevadas, and also avoid the hostile Indians which infest the northern plains. We have succeeded in both respects."

Carlita Fernandez had leaped from the wagon and was chattering excitedly at some of the people. Don Justo watched her curiously, and Sloane said:

"A girl from your *hacienda*. I found her in Westport, anxious to return home. She had been captured by the Apaches many years before. *Señorita* Carlita Fernandez."

"Of course," Don Justo nodded. "I remember her. You have been very kind in bringing her back, *Señor* Sloane."

"It was nothing," Sloane said blandly.

Flint looked at him, a grim smile on his face, and then

he saw Maria Teresa coming through the gate, moving toward them. She was smiling, looking very different from the girl Flint had met in Westport. She was dressed in a flowing Spanish dress, and she wore a blue *rebozo* over her shoulders. There was a rose in her hair. She was a picture of coolness in the hot, still air.

Flint stepped down from the wagon. He saw Sloane watching her, too, and then the Easterner glanced down at him and grinned knowingly. When the girl came up, Flint said:

"I'm glad you made it all right. It was a long trip."

"I thought of you much on the journey," Maria Teresa said frankly. "If I had known you were coming straight to the *hacienda*, we would have given you directions so that you could avoid the rough country."

"It was worth it getting here," Flint said gallantly.

Don Justo was saying, "May I present my daughter, *Señorita* Maria Teresa." He turned to her, "The Americans are my guests. I shall expect you to do everything possible to make them feel at home, Maria."

"The Americans are welcome," Maria smiled.

George Sloane said, "*Muchias gracias, Señorita.*" He swept his hat from his head, and his brown hair gleamed in the sunlight.

Flint frowned, and he was glad when he was able to walk off with the girl a few minutes later. They stopped at the edge of the fruit orchard, and Flint said, "Your father is immensely rich."

"His grandfather received the grant from the King of Spain," Maria Teresa explained. "This is the only *hacienda* west of the Concepcion Range. It has been well kept by the family."

She asked questions about their trip from Santa Fe, and she studied Flint's face as he spoke. She said:

"You have lost weight, *Señor* Raynor. You have been through many hardships."

"We're not through them yet," Flint scowled. "We still haven't reached California."

The girl's eyes clouded. "And how soon will you leave for California?" she asked.

Flint shook his head. Looking at her, he wished he did not have to leave at all. There was nothing in California to attract him now. He looked across the big fruit orchard, at the beautiful flower gardens Don Justo had planted around the walls of the *hacienda*. He said slowly, "I do not know. Sloane is head of the outfit."

Maria Teresa walked slowly down a flagstone path. She said, "And what is *Señor* Sloane after? He does not look to me like a man who will travel these immense distances for nothing."

Flint glanced at her quickly, pleased at the discernment she'd shown. He said, "I can't disclose Sloane's plans. They were given to me in confidence." Even as he said it he was thinking that he should disclose Sloane's plans because they concerned Don Justo. The treasure of the old *padres* was on his land.

Maria Teresa smiled. "The men who come out here," she said, "are men of mystery, but they are all seeking the 'Lost Padre Mine'. I would not be surprised if *Señor* Sloane thought he could find it."

Flint blinked, "That might be so," he admitted. "Is there such a mine?"

"We shall take a ride out to the ruins of the old mission tomorrow, if you wish," Maria Teresa said. "They are interesting to see. Perhaps you may find the old mine yourself, *Señor* Raynor."

Flint grinned. "I'd like to see the ruins," he said. "The gold does not interest me much."

Maria Teresa nodded. "I believe you speak the truth," she stated. "You are the first American I have found who is not interested in the mine. You are to be commended, *Señor* Raynor."

"I have found other things in life more valuable than gold," Flint said, "and I have seen what gold can do to men."

"You speak like a philosopher," Maria Teresa smiled. "I shall enjoy your company tomorrow."

Flint went back to the wagons, walking on air. George Sloane said to him:

"You did not waste any time, Flint."

"I don't know how long I'll be here," Flint said flatly.

"That's true," Sloane nodded. "We cannot afford to waste time, and yet we do not wish to arouse the Don's suspicions. Besides, we all need rest—men and horses—or we'll never reach California."

Flint looked at him and grimaced. "In California there is more gold," he said.

"The land is filthy with it," Sloane chuckled. "That's tough."

One of Don Justo's servants showed them to their rooms. The house itself was enormous, an adobe, spreading over a large area of ground, and comfortably cool because of the exceedingly thick walls.

Indian woven rugs, brightly colored, hung from the walls and covered the smooth-planked, polished floors. There were a number of open fireplaces, bookshelves, mirrors, fine paintings, silver candlesticks, indicating that Don Justo was a man of taste.

They had their first bath since leaving Westport, aside from occasional dips in various rivers. An Indian attendant brought them warm water for the big galvanized tub they found in one of the rooms.

When they came out of the bath, clean clothes were laid out for them, velvet jackets, satin trousers, silk shirts, slippers. Preacher Davis stared at the outfits a little dubiously.

Sloane said laughingly, "We're all Spanish grandees now, gentlemen. We must act the parts."

The Preacher shook his head as he picked up the velvet embroidered jacket and the gay crimson sash which went with it. He watched Flint climb into his outfit.

Clean-shaven now, he'd also had one of the Indian attendants cut his hair a little. He looked trim, hard as nails, face lean and brown. The outfit fitted him as if it had been tailored for his body.

George Sloane nodded approvingly. "You could pass for the son of old Don Justo, himself," he said, "or should I say the son-in-law?"

Flint reddened under the tan. He watched the Preacher struggling into the jacket, nearly tearing out the seams with his huge shoulders. He said without looking at Sloane:

"And what do you think of her?"

"I admire your choice," Sloane said.

"Nothing else?" Flint smiled.

"She has much common sense," Sloane said blandly.

"She did not fall for my good looks. I could see that."

"Vanity of vanities," Preacher murmured. "All is vanity."

"With me," Sloane grinned, "it's simply logic. I know what most women think of me. I'm not a damned fool."

"No one ever said you were," Flint told him.

"As far as this girl is concerned," Sloane smiled, "you have a clear field, Flint. I'm after gold this trip—much gold, and nothing else."

CHAPTER 13

DINNER was served that night at eight o'clock in the main dining room. Flint descended the steps before Sloane and the Preacher. He left Sloane hacking away at the stubble on his face with a razor, and the Preacher trying to get his huge feet into slippers which were several sizes too small for him.

Moving through the cool halls, Flint stepped through a back doorway out into a small patio. Flowers grew here in abundance, sprayed with a fine mist from a fountain which shot from the mouth of a cherub. He saw Maria Teresa sitting on a stone bench a few feet to his left, a book in her lap. It was too dark to read now. Small lanterns were strung across the patio, and he could see her face clearly. She was smiling up at him approvingly.

"You look more presentable now, *Señor Raynor*," she said. "I hardly recognized you with the beard shaved."

"There wasn't too much time for shaving on the trip," Flint said, "and little water to waste."

Maria Teresa put the book on the bench beside her. She said, "Yours in the first American wagon train to reach here. My father is much interested in American methods of freighting."

"Why is that?" Flint asked.

"He is contemplating opening a regular route from the

hacienda and northern Mexico up into California—to the new gold fields, where I understand the men have plenty of gold, but little good food.”

Flint nodded. “Such a route would mean much profit to your father,” he said. “He could drive his cattle up such a trail.”

Don Justo said from the doorway behind him, a pleasant smile on his face, “I am not so much interested in profits, my young friend, as I am in opening the trade route between my country and the western portion of yours. There has been much ill-feeling since the recent war, and that should not be between neighbors and friends.”

“I have heard,” Flint said, “of the Sonora Pass which can take us up into lower California. Is there such a route?”

“The old *padres* of the Mission San Sebastian used the pass route on their missionary journeys up to the Mission de Los Angeles,” Don Justo said. “I have been over the route with mules and pack trains. It is feasible to make the journey with loaded wagons, although in many places it will be rough.”

“You have much to sell to the miners,” Flint observed. “They will welcome you with open arms if you can get up to San Francisco with cattle, hides, tallow and food-stuffs. From the stories told in Westport they are living on salt pork coming off the ships.”

“We need American machinery, American equipment,” Don Justo said. “My whole country needs it. I believe we can establish this trade route to the port of San Francisco. It will be well for all of us, but one thing is lacking.”

“What is that?” Flint asked.

“American methods of freighting materials are unknown in my country,” Don Justo said. “We have always used pack trains, but mules cannot carry the kind of

merchandise I am sending out and bringing back. We will need your big Pittsburgh wagons used in the Santa Fe trade. We need, also, an American to break the ground for such a business, and to handle the big caravans I will send north. I am an old man, and I can no longer make the trip. I have no sons."

"I wish I were a man, *padre*," Maria Teresa said thoughtfully.

"You would have made a most beautiful one," Don Justo smiled, "but you would have broken the heart of some fortunate young man who in time will fall in love with you."

Señorita Maria Teresa looked at the ground, but Flint saw the flush in her face. He listened to Don Justo describe the conditions along the trail to California, and then Sloane sauntered out with Preacher Davis.

They listened to the talk, and Davis asked many questions concerning the various passes he would have to find on the way north.

George Sloane said, "It is a great business proposition, Don Justo. I wish you success in it."

"It will succeed," the Don smiled, "if I can get the right men to work for me."

They ate in the big hall at a table elaborately spread. They ate from rare china porcelain and fine silverware. The Preacher said grace for fully five minutes in a booming voice which frightened one of the Indian servants so that she dropped a plate on the stone floor in the kitchen.

The table was lighted with candles which glistened on the silverware, lighting up the enormous plates of food. Rich wine was served in fragile goblets, which Flint was afraid to hold too tightly for fear of breaking.

The meal took fully two hours of the evening, and even this span of time seemed too short to Flint who sat directly opposite Maria Teresa, watching the ex-

pressions on her face, noting the way the candlelight illuminated her hair.

Sloane and Preacher Davis continued to ask questions about the trail north into California, and Don Justo queried them concerning freighting methods in the States, the feasibility of using mules or oxen for the long hauls.

Maria Teresa wanted to know about Kentucky, and Flint told her of the frontier settlements there, the early troubles with the Indians, and the growing scarcity of good land which was the reason many Kentuckians were moving west with the tide.

"There is plenty of room west of the Missouri," Flint said, "and a man needs room."

"I suppose you want to see all of it," Maria Teresa said wistfully.

"I have seen my share already," Flint smiled. "No other wagon outfit has followed the path we are taking." He wanted to add that no other outfit would follow that crazy detour either.

At ten o'clock Don Justo passed out rich, fragrant cigarillos, which was the signal for Maria Teresa to leave the room. Flint heard her light steps going up the stairs, and then he sat down.

Don Justo puffed on his cigarillo and looked at the three men at his table. The Preacher was sitting at the table, big hands folded in front of him, staring into space. George Sloane smoked with pleasure, always in good humor, the food and the wine having made him even more mellow if anything. He glanced at Flint and he smiled.

Don Justo leaned back in an exquisitely carved mahogany chair. He said casually. "So you have come to find a new route to California, *Señors*."

"That's right," Sloane nodded, and Flint saw him watching the Don closely as he puffed on the cigarillo.

"There was no other reason?" Don Justo murmured.

Sloane moistened his lips. He smiled thinly, and he said, "I do not understand what the Don means?"

The old man shrugged his thin shoulders. He put the tips of his fingers together as he smoked, and he said, "Most Americans, and not a few Mexicans, have come to the Mission San Sebastian del Sur for entirely different reasons. You are undoubtedly aware of the fact that the famous 'Lost Padre Mine' is supposedly in this vicinity?"

"We have heard of it," Sloane said, and his face showed nothing.

Flint flicked ash from his cigarillo. He glanced at the Preacher, who was not smoking. He wondered how far Blaze Corcoran was behind them. The Preacher had stated Corcoran had been having trouble with his wagons and mules, also. He'd smashed several of the wagons, trying to get them down the cliff walls, and many of his mules had given out.

"The Lost Padre Mine," Don Justo was saying, "has attracted many men through the centuries. When my *vaqueros* saw your wagons I was of the opinion you, too, were coming to make a search, or perhaps you had a clue as to the location of the treasure."

Flint stared at the old man. Don Justo's face expressed nothing, but he had the feeling that the Don was toying with them, that he knew much more than he was saying.

"A man would be a fool," Sloane conceded, "if, knowing the location of the lost mine, he did not make some small attempt to search for it as he passed through. I am sure the Don does not object to an American satisfying that little whim."

"Not at all," the Don said surprisingly. "Make my *hacienda* your headquarters while you make the search, and all that you find you may take with you."

There was a booming silence in the room. George Sloane was leaning forward in his chair, the cigarillo sagging a little in his mouth. Preacher Davis stared at the Don.

"I—I don't understand," Sloane said slowly. "You mean that if we were to locate the Lost Padre Mine you would not want any of the gold from it?"

Don Justo's smile broadened. "If you find the gold," he stated, "you are entitled to it. I make the same proposition to every man who comes to my *hacienda* searching. I have seen too many go away disillusioned. Gold is an elusive thing, *Señors*, and it does not always bring the happiness men assume that it will."

"Very true," George Sloane nodded, but his eyes were glittering as he glanced at Flint.

It was working out even better than he had thought, Flint could see. There would be no occasion to rush things now. He could repair his wagons, load up his supplies, perhaps purchase new mules from the Don, and then head north into California without any trouble—except that which he expected from Blaze Corcoran, and Sloane did not seem particularly worried about this menace.

"If I have made gold my hope, or have said to the fine gold, thou art my confidence, I am a fool," Preacher Davis droned.

Don Justo glanced at the big man, nodding his head in approval. He said, "The lust for gold is not a precious thing in the sight of God nor of man."

George Sloane laughed. "In passing," he said, "we shall have our look for the mine, also. I would not have it said in San Francisco that I went past the Mission Sabastian without taking at least one day to search for the fabulous treasure of the *padres*."

"You may take as many days as you wish," Don Justo told him, "and I wish you success."

The dinner was over. They stood up, had another glass of wine, and then Don Justo retired for the night. The three men went up the stairs to their rooms. Sloane followed Flint and the Preacher into the room they shared closing the door behind him. He stood there with his back to the door, the half-smoked cigarillo in his mouth, a broad grin on his face.

"The gods go with us," he said softly.

"There is no other God but Jehovah," Preacher Davis told him. "The gods you worship, my young friend, will turn and rend you some day."

"The Don," Sloane said, not even hearing the Preacher, "thinks we are just another party of adventurers searching for the treasure. He has seen so many other outfits fail that he does not believe it possible any one will find the gold."

"Where is Carlita?" Flint asked him.

"She is safe in the *hacienda*," Sloane said. "She knows Corcoran is behind us somewhere, and she'll stay here. I don't believe Corcoran will be able to come in without the Don's *vaqueros* spotting him and telling us about it." He said to the Preacher, "How far did you say Corcoran was behind us, Reverend?"

"Three days' journey," the Preacher said. "He was repairing wagons."

"We will start work on the wagons tomorrow," Sloane said rapidly. "The Don will give us some of his workmen and let us use his blacksmith shop. The day after tomorrow we can ride out with Carlita and have a look at the mine."

"Suppose she has forgotten the location," Flint asked him.

Sloane laughed. "She has not forgotten," he said. "She remembered this territory immediately when we came across the Concepcion Range. She used to tend sheep

here when she was a little girl, and she knew the countryside quite well."

"So in two days," Flint murmured, "we uncover the treasure of the old padres."

"Two days," Sloane whispered, "and we spend the rest of our lives in the lap of luxury."

Preacher Davis yawned openly, and Sloane grinned at him. He said, "We weary the Reverend, Flint. Shall we retire?"

CHAPTER 14

IN THE MORNING at the breakfast table, Maria Teresa said to Flint. "Do you still wish to see the ruins of the old Mission, *Señor* Raynor?"

Flint had been wondering if she'd forgotten the trip, and he'd been fishing around in his mind, trying to think up some way of mentioning it without forcing himself upon her. He said, "I would consider it a great pleasure."

Sloane was speaking with the Don, making arrangements to use the blacksmith shop. After a while they left the men and went out together and walked to the stables.

The Preacher had already saddled his horse and ridden off without a word to anyone, and Flint assumed he was riding out to check on Corcoran's wagons again.

Two beautiful chestnut horses were waiting for them

in the stables, already saddled. They rode out through the *hacienda* gates, and Sloane, standing by the blacksmith shop, waved a hand to them.

They passed the huts of many peons and they skirted bean and melon patches until they were a few miles north of the *hacienda*. Then Maria Teresa turned her horse up a faint trace which led into the hills. Flint saw the abandoned fields now, fields which once had been worked by the Indian converts of the old *padres*. There were traces of irrigation ditches, and occasional stone walls.

Flint said thoughtfully, "They were hard workers."

"It was a pity they had to leave all this," Maria Teresa nodded. "The new mission is a dozen miles to the north. It, too, is very beautiful. If you stay, we may have time to see it."

Flint looked around. "Was the gold mine supposed to be near the Mission," he asked.

Maria Teresa laughed. "Men have suspected that it was, and they've searched every foot of the land within miles of this place, but they have found nothing. It could very well have been that the mine was ten or fifteen miles away in any direction."

"I won't look for it," Flint grinned. "I'm just curious."

He could see the ruins on a distant hill, the tumble-down adobe walls on which the old *padres* had labored for so many years in centuries gone by.

A high adobe wall had once surrounded the many buildings of the Mission. As they rode up a coyote sped away, leaping over the stones. Weeds and trees were now growing where once the *padres* had worked with their Indian converts.

A beautiful spot had been picked for the Mission. It was high up, and the breeze swept the little plateau from all directions. They dismounted and walked among the stones. Several snakes wriggled away at their approach.

Overhead an eagle sailed majestically against the blue of the sky.

"I come here often," Maria Teresa said quietly. "I love this place."

"The old *padres* knew how to build and where to build," Flint nodded. He stepped up on an overturned section of abode wall and stared into the distance—toward the east. He'd thought he'd seen a tiny dust cloud off on the horizon, but he wasn't sure.

Maria Teresa said, "What is it, *Señor Raynor*?"

Flint saw it again, and it was dust, moving dust, horses coming toward them. He said, quietly, "Riders."

"My father's *vaqueros* bringing in strayed stock," the girl said. "Our land grant extends many miles to the east."

"It could be the *vaqueros*," Flint nodded, but he kept staring at the tiny ball of dust. There were not many riders, probably a half-dozen or so, and they were moving at a leisurely pace which would bring them abreast of the ruined mission in an hour or so.

Maria Teresa said lightly, "We will not worry about them." She sat down on the rock and opened a knapsack she had brought along. Inside there were small white cakes and cold grape juice in a jug.

Flint glanced again toward the moving dust cloud, and there was a slight frown on his face as he sat down. They were coming from the east, and Blaze Corcoran and his crew were coming from the east, also. Corcoran's wagons, according to the Preacher, were still a few days behind them, but it was possible Corcoran or some of his men had gone on ahead to reconnoiter.

While they were eating, Flint occasionally glanced toward the moving riders. After a while he could make them out. They were traveling in the general direction of the *hacienda*, which would bring them within a half mile or so of the plateau on which the ruined mission was located.

If they continued as they were going now, they would

pass the plateau. Flint could see now that they were not driving cattle. He could count six riders in the group.

Maria Teresa said, "Why are you so worried, *Señor* Raynor. There are no unfriendly Indians in this country. Did you think they were Indians?"

"Worse than Indians," Flint said tersely. "I believe it's part of the crew which has followed us from Westport to Santa Fe, and from Santa Fe out here."

The girl looked at him steadily. "And why, *Señor* Raynor?" she asked.

"They're after the Lost Padre's gold," Flint scowled, "the same as we are."

"You are not after it," Maria Teresa said. "*Señor* Sloane is."

"I'm with him," Flint told her. "I signed with his outfit, but I thought he intended to go to California. I didn't know till much later that he was after gold."

"He shall not find it," Maria Teresa said. "None of them have been able to find it. I do not believe the *padres* want them to find it because so much gold will do harm rather than good. Men will die because of it."

"Men have already died because of it," Flint told her, "and I believe more will, but George Sloane is not out here on a wild goose chase. He knows where the gold is."

The girl stared at him. "He knows where the Lost Padre Mine is located?" she repeated.

Flint looked down at the glass of grape juice in his hand. He said slowly, "You and your father are entitled to know. The gold is on your land. George Sloane came out here with Carlita Fernandez, a girl whom he met in Westport."

"The girl who was captured by the Apaches many years ago," Maria Teresa nodded. "I know you brought her back."

"Carlita knows where the Lost Mine is," Flint said. "She learned its location from her great grandfather."

Sloane and a man named Corcoran, an Indian trader, have been fighting for possession of her since leaving Westport. They are both positive she can lead them to the mine. Corcoran is a few days behind us now with seventy-five gunmen."

Maria Teresa stared at the distant riders. "And you think these riders may be Corcoran's men sent on ahead," she said.

"I was afraid of that," Flint told her. "I believe now they are going past us. They will not bother us."

He was wrong. The six riders suddenly turned and started to move straight toward the plateau.

"They are coming here," Maria Teresa murmured.

"I was worried about that," Flint growled. "This is the highest spot in the vicinity. They'll want to have a look at the surrounding country from up here."

"Shall we ride?" Maria Teresa asked.

"They're in between us and the *hacienda*," Flint said grimly, "and if we leave now, they'll chase us. I don't want them throwing any lead at you."

He took the Colt gun from the holster, examined the charges, and squatted down behind the rocks. The horses were out of sight behind an adobe wall. Maria Teresa sat down beside Flint, and the worry was in her eyes now.

"They'll recognize you," she said. "Are you going to fight them?"

"Corcoran has no use for me," Flint said softly. "If he finds me here, he'd be glad to shoot me down. I'll have to fight. You lie quietly when they open up on us." He asked, "Some of your *vaqueros* might hear the shooting if they're in the vicinity and they'll come this way. We can hope for that."

The six riders were only a few hundred yards away when Flint recognized Blaze Corcoran's buckskin horse. He'd been hoping against hope that he was wrong, and

that the riders weren't from Corcoran's outfit. He cocked the hammer of the gun now and he waited. He could hear Maria Teresa breathing hard next to him.

They were coming up the slope, and they were fifty yards away when one of them spotted the fresh tracks made by Flint's and Maria Teresa's horses. They stopped, and Flint saw Corcoran slip a rifle from the saddle holster.

"They know we're here," he said softly.

They'd started to ride again, and when they were thirty yards away, Flint called:

"That's far enough, Corcoran." He fired, his bullet kicking up dust in front of the buckskin horse.

The six riders broke for cover. They were able to hide their horses below a kind of projecting shelf halfway down the slope, and they scattered behind rocks and ledges. Several shots were fired toward the rocks behind which Flint and the girl were hidden.

Corcoran's voice came up at them, "That you, Raynor?" He was crouching behind a rock about thirty-five yards away.

Flint answered him with a shot which chipped a piece from the rock. He heard Corcoran's curse, and then several bullets banged into the adobe walls behind them.

A man ran from one rock toward another, and Flint sent a shot at him. The runner went down, rolled over and over, clutching his right shoulder, and then managed to get behind the rocks.

Flint said, "One of them out of the fight."

The others had started to spread out a little more. Two of them were moving around the north side of the plateau slope with the intention of coming up on Flint from the rear. Flint frowned, knowing that once they were up on the plateau, and in among the fallen walls, he would be at a disadvantage. He'd have to watch bullets from two sides, and he was one gun against five.

"Only one of 'em firin', Blaze," a man called. "Two riders went up there."

Corcoran said, "Move out. Get up behind him."

Flint had already lost sight of two of the men, which meant that they were now scrambling up the north slope and at any moment he could expect bullets from the rear.

He said quietly, "I'm going to give it up. I don't want them firing in here. You'll be hit."

Maria Teresa looked at him steadily. "They'll kill you, won't they?" she said. "He knows you're Sloane's *segundo*."

"I don't know what he'll do to me," Flint said, "but I don't believe he'll touch you when I tell him you are Don Justo's daughter. He knows he'll never leave this country alive."

"Then I'll tell him, myself," Maria Teresa said simply. "You have a chance to break away for yourself. They're all dismounted now."

"I'm not leaving you here alone," Flint smiled. "We'll work it out some other way. You keep down behind these rocks. I'm going back to see what I can do about the men coming up the north slope."

"Wait," Marie Teresa said suddenly. She was looking out between the rocks. "There's a rider coming up," she said.

Flint saw the rider at the same time—a single horseman who'd just ridden over a rise in the ground and was now galloping up behind Blaze Corcoran's crew. They had not seen him as yet.

Flint said softly, "That looks like the Preacher. He must have heard the shooting."

"That will make the fight more equal," Maria Teresa said.

Flint chuckled, "With the Preacher on our side," he said, "we have a big edge."

He watched Preacher Davis dismount about three or

four hundred yards behind Corcoran's crouching men. It was a long shot even with a rifle, but the Preacher knelt and took aim. Flint saw the puff of white smoke from the muzzle of the rifle, and then he heard the report.

One of the men below stood up very suddenly, took a few steps forward, and pitched on his face.

"That makes four men against us," Flint said.

Preacher Davis' gun cracked again, and a second man rolled down the slope. Blaze Corcoran got up and sprinted for the ledge where they'd left the horses. A few moments later Flint saw him galloping madly toward the east, leading two horses.

The men who had been going up the north slope of the plateau raced down, mounted the horses, and rode off with Corcoran.

Flint said mirthlessly, "Reckon they didn't like that kind of shooting. Corcoran knew who was behind him, and he realized that next bullet was for him. He didn't stay for it."

Preacher Davis had mounted his horse and was riding forward again. They saw him stop and look at the two dead men, and then he rode over to the rock behind which the wounded man was crouching. Then he came on up the slope, his rifle across the pommel of his saddle.

Flint stood up to greet him. The Preacher said laconically,

"Heard your shots. I came over to see what was going on." He glanced after the retreating riders, and he said, "Corcoran?"

"He nearly had us," Flint nodded.

"I shot the wrong men," Davis murmured. "We'd better get back to the *hacienda*. The man down below has a broken shoulder. Your father can send a wagon out for him, *Señorita*."

"They came on ahead to see where we were," Flint observed. "He'll be a little more careful the next time."

"When a man is this close to much gold," Preacher Davis stated, "he sometimes loses his sense of caution. He will bear close watching."

They rode back to the *hacienda*, and a wagon was sent out to pick up the wounded man. Don Justo listened to the story of the fight, nodding his head gravely.

"This outfit," Flint said, "is after the Lost Padre Gold. They've trailed us from Sante Fe."

George Sloane stood with the Don, watching Flint, his face tense. Flint said no more on the subject, leaving it up to Maria Teresa to tell her father if she wished to. She'd gone into the house when they returned.

The Don said, "My *vaqueros* have seen this second wagon train on the other side of the Concepcion Range. We have wondered who they are."

"They feel that I know where the lost mine is located," George Sloane said easily when Flint volunteered no more information.

The Don smiled and shrugged. "You are a most fortunate young man, *Señor* Sloane," he said, "if you know where the lost treasure is."

"I have my theory where it is," Sloane smiled.

"All men who come out here do," the Don told him. "All of them carry maps which supposedly will lead them to the lost mine. They go away disappointed."

"Doubtless," George Sloane said, "I shall go away disappointed, also."

"I wish you success," the Don smiled. "You are a most pleasant young man, and I should like your company at dinner again tonight." He looked at the three of them—Flint, Sloane, and the Preacher. He said to Flint, "Once again I am indebted to you, *Señor* Raynor, for aiding my daughter."

"The Preacher was responsible," Flint said. "He's a one-man army."

"I labor," the Preacher said, "in the army of the Lord."

CHAPTER 15

THEY HAD dinner again that night in the dining room, and it was the same luxurious repast as on the previous evening. The Don was friendly, congenial, the perfect host, and Flint was positive Maria Teresa had said nothing to him about Carlita Fernandez.

George Sloane was relaxed and cheerful, also. He'd studied the Don's face carefully when the old man came into the dining room, and then he'd looked at Flint and the girl.

"This is most pleasant company," the Don smiled. "It is not often that I have Americans at my table. I sincerely trust that this stay will be extended."

"We are deeply grateful for your hospitality," Sloane told him. "We can never repay you. We shall be reluctant to leave the *hacienda*."

"And when have you planned on leaving?" the Don asked him.

"Perhaps in two days," Sloane said. "I anticipated satisfying my little ambition by riding out into the hills tomorrow to make my search for the treasure."

"Of course," Don Justo nodded and smiled, "do not

miss this opportunity. When I was a boy, I, too, made my search for the treasure of the old *padres*." He was an old man now, speaking to a young boy who must have his whim satisfied.

George Sloane glanced at him and frowned as he lifted a wine glass to his lips. Flint sat opposite Maria Teresa again, listening to the talk, saying little himself. He was thinking of the long, lonely trail up to California, fighting off Blaze Corcoran and his outfit, trying to reach civilization with George Sloane's gold, if he were able to find it. And at the end of the trail there was nothing for him. His heart would still be back here at the *hacienda* of Don Justo Almazon.

They finished the meal, and it was time for the cigars. Don Justo was looking around for one of his servants when Flint Raynor had the first hint of impending danger.

Outside, on the kitchen floor, he heard a boot scrape faintly. He glanced quickly at the Preacher, and he noticed that Davis was sitting up straight, head tense as if he were listening. Neither Sloane nor Don Justo seemed to have heard the sound.

The Preacher started to push back his chair, and Flint was beginning to regret that he'd come downstairs unarmed, when they heard the muffled sound in the kitchen. Both he and the Preacher were out of their chairs when Blaze Corcoran stepped in through the kitchen door, a Colt gun in either hand, a broad, cold grin on his wide, bony face. The Preacher's hand was inside his jacket when Corcoran's flat voice reached him:

"Leave it where it is, Preacher. I'd hate to kill a man who was sitting down for his dinner."

Davis' hand came out of the jacket. He glanced around and then he sat down again. George Sloane was half out of his chair, his face pale, tight. For the first time in his life he was not quite sure as to his next action. He was

not armed either. It had not seemed necessary to carry guns inside the *hacienda* with Don Justo's *vaqueros* riding in the vicinity.

Flint glanced toward a side door to the left—a door which led to another part of the house. He contemplated the distance, wondering if he could make it in two long leaps before Corcoran's guns roared. It was a long chance. And then he felt the muzzle of a six-gun rammed into the small of his back, and he heard a harsh voice say:

"Sit where you are, Buck."

Flint relaxed. He glanced at George Sloane, feeling sorry for the man. Once he'd seen a beautiful wildcat caught in a trap in the Kentucky woods. Looking at Sloane, he was reminded of this cat.

"We have unexpected company, gentlemen," Don Justo said softly.

An American in a peaked Mexican sombrero moved behind Preacher Davis. He slid his hand inside the Preacher's jacket and came out with the Colt gun.

Two other men making five altogether, were now in the room, coming through side doors, guns drawn, watching closely. Blaze Corcoran said tersely:

"We're not entirely unexpected, *Señor Almazon*. I believe my friend Sloane was expecting us, but not quite so soon."

Preacher Davis said, "You didn't bring your wagons, Corcoran."

"Cached them back in the mountains," Corcoran grinned, "and came along on horse and muleback. For once in your life you figured wrong, Preacher."

"The wise man's eyes are in his head," the Preacher said, "but the fool walketh in darkness."

"May I ask," Don Justo murmured, "What you want in my house, *Señor*?"

"What I want," Corcoran chuckled, "I got. A dark-haired, dark-eyed dancing girl. That right, Sloane?"

George Sloane didn't say anything. He was sitting at the table, staring at the wine glass in front of him, the cigar in his mouth, face cold, expressionless.

"Your crew, Sloane," Blaze Corcoran said coolly, "is already disarmed. My men occupy the *hacienda*. We've disarmed every one we've found in the enclosure."

"You have worked softly and quickly," Don Justo observed. "May I congratulate you on your dispatch. I presume you, too, are after the Lost Padre gold."

"You presume right," Corcoran told him. "We're all after it—even these dogs who sit at your table."

"I would like," George Sloane said evenly, "to exonerate the Preacher and Mr. Raynor." He was looking straight at Don Justo. "Neither of them would have anything to do with my plan of taking the treasure without your knowledge and consent."

Don Justo flashed Flint a quick smile of gratification. He nodded and he said:

"Many good men have gone wrong because of the Lost Padre gold, my young friend, and besides I gave you permission to make the search, did I not?"

"I had intended to go ahead," Sloane told him honestly, "even if you hadn't given me permission."

Don Justo looked at Corcoran. "And what do you intend to do with your prisoners, *Señor*?" he asked.

"Nothing to you," Corcoran said grimly. "You won't have any trouble with us, Don Justo, if you keep out of our way. We're taking the Lost Padre gold out of this country as fast as we can go. I'll even pay for any supplies and mules I'll take from your place."

"You are most honest," Don Justo murmured.

"Reckon I can afford to be," Corcoran chuckled, "with the gold coming out of the Lost Padre Mine. That right, Sloane?"

George Sloane shrugged, but said nothing. Corcoran said evenly:

"These three gents with you, Don Justo, I can't take chances with. You see that, can't you? They've come to the end of the road.

Flint felt his stomach turn slightly as he looked into the muzzle of the gun pointed at him. He had no doubt that Corcoran would go through with his plan of putting them out of the way. The latter had come a long, hard way, and he would take no chances now that the treasure be lost again."

"You wouldn't murder a man at the table of his host," George Sloane snapped. "Don't be so damned primitive, Corcoran."

"I know a nicer way," Corcoran grinned, "all according to the rules of etiquette. I served in the Mexican War, Sloane. I know how to handle prisoners who are not wanted." He tightened his grip on the two guns and he said, "Everybody up and walk outside, and remember you're covered every minute."

Flint stood up. He looked at the Preacher, and the big man shook his head slightly, an indication of defeat. They went out the front door into the enclosure and another dozen men were waiting for them, guns drawn.

A bonfire had begun to blaze in the courtyard, and in the bright light they could see sleepy-eyed, bewildered men struggling into the *hacienda*, other men covering them with guns. Flint recognized the men of their own crew.

Groups of terrified peons and Indian servants were huddled in the shadows along the wall and near the buildings. Two men were dragging the terrified Carlita Fernandez across the enclosure toward the house. She emitted a short scream when she saw Blaze Corcoran.

Flint, the Preacher, Sloane and Don Justo were herded toward the fire, and they stood there in the bright light, saying nothing. Flint saw Maria Teresa come out of the

house, one of Corcoran's men covering her with a gun. She ran down to her father, the concern in her eyes.

"Do not worry, my dear," Don Justo smiled. "You will go back into the house. They do not mean any harm to us."

"But these men," Maria Teresa protested. "What are they going to do with them?" She looked directly at Flint as she spoke, and Flint Raynor that moment wanted very much to live. But he stood silently, looking into the flames.

Sloane's crew, disarmed, were forced to sit down on the ground near the fire. Blaze Corcoran said tersely:

"Get all the women and children out of here."

Carlita Fernandez, sobbing violently, was led into the house. The Indian servants and the Mexican women were herded in after her. Maria Teresa stared at the three men by the fire, and Flint saw the fear and the terror come into her eyes. She gasped:

"Padre, they cannot do this."

"Do not worry, my child," Don Justo said quietly. "You must go into the house." He was smoking his cigarillo as he stood by the fire.

Maria Teresa nodded. She looked at Flint again just before she walked away, and there was much in the look.

Corcoran said to Sloane, "I don't like to do this, but I'm playing for big stakes. It's a long way to California, and I can't take you along as my prisoner because you're too damned clever. I can't leave you behind because you'll follow me and make an attempt to regain the gold."

"You have nothing against the Reverend Davis," Sloane said quietly, "nor against Flint Raynor. Neither of them are after the Lost Padre treasure."

"I have no damned use for Raynor," Corcoran snarled, "and the Preacher might reach California before I do and have the authorities waiting for me when I came in, on the charge of killing you."

Sloane was silent. He looked at Flint and he shook his head regretfully. He said, "I'm sorry about this, Flint. I didn't want it this way."

Flint shrugged. "I was in a dangerous game," he said.

Preacher Davis said, "The soul that sinneth, it shall die."

"Don't quote your scripture at me," Blaze Corcoran snapped.

"Even the devil," the Preacher said quietly, "knows God and trembles before Him."

"Walk over to the wall," Corcoran said slowly. "Walk over and turn around, the three of you."

George Sloane was the first one to move. He shook his head again at Flint as he went past him toward the high, whitewashed abode wall. Flint and the Preacher followed him. They stood there, facing the fire, their shadows flickering grotesquely on the wall. A woman screamed somewhere inside the enclosure.

Corcoran gave a low order, and a dozen men stepped up to him—men with rifles. They lined up less than ten yards from the three men facing them. There was a ominous silence after the gun hammers were snapped back.

Flint glanced toward the house. He looked at Sloane to his left, standing with his feet slightly apart, hands on his hips, looking very trim in his Mexican grandee outfit. The firelight reflected on the handsome, smooth-shaven face, lighting up the cool brown eyes. There was no fear in him.

Preacher Davis stood at Flint's right, his battered Bible in his hand, a man resigned to any fate in store for him, waiting calmly for the bullets to strike him down.

It was George Sloane who quoted scripture—Sloane who had had upbringing:

"For what hath man," Sloane said softly, "of all his

labor, and of the vexation of his heart, wherein he hath labored under the sun?"

Preacher Davis finished for him: "For all his days are sorrows, and his travail grief, his heart taketh not to rest in the night. This is also vanity."

"Ready?" Blaze Corcoran called, his voice sounding unnatural.

Two men with drawn guns stood a few yards to either side of the condemned men so that they could not make a break away from the wall. The rifles were up, lined on the targets. Flint Raynor looked into the muzzles and he felt his body stiffening instinctively, preparing itself for the impact of the bullets. There were no sounds now, only the crackling of the fire, the flames leaping up into the night sky. A coyote howled on a distant hill.

Don Justo, who was standing by the fire, a few yards from Corcoran said coolly: "*Señor Corcoran*, there are one hundred guns trained on your body. You will be blasted into eternity one second after those rifles sound."

Blaze Corcoran turned around slowly. Flint noticed some of the rifle barrels in front of him drooping.

"Look to the walls," Don Justo said, his voice ringing.

The flames from the fire were leaping higher and higher, illuminating more and more of the big courtyard, the light reaching now to the top of the abode walls surrounding the *hacienda* enclosure.

Flint looked up, his heart pounding. Then he saw them up on the walls, covering every foot of space, crouching figures with rifles ready, huge peaked sombreros, lean, brown faces, glistening white teeth, dozens and dozens of men—the vaqueros of Don Justo Almazon.

They extended as far as could be seen, but there were more beyond the farthest reaches of the firelight. Flint could see their shadowy figures. Don Justo was saying calmly:

"Both your caravans were trailed and watched every

day for the past week, my friends. *Señor* Corcoran, my *vaqueros* have been watching your outfit closely since *Señor* Sloane arrived. For that reason you found practically none of my riders in the *hacienda* when you arrived, and you captured it quite easily, largely because I was expecting you."

Blaze Corcoran was standing in a half crouch, the fire-light flickering on his taut face. He turned around and around, looking down along the walls, a hideous disappointment distorting his face.

Flint watched him closely, trying to read his mind. Corcoran was weighing his chances, thinking of the treasure of the 'Lost Padre Mine', remembering perhaps his experience in the Mexican War when smaller bodies of Americans had easily subdued Santa Anna's peon army.

"My men, *Señor* Corcoran," Don Justo said dryly, "are excellent shots. What is your wish?"

Corcoran's crew were scattered in the courtyard, watching their leader tensely, waiting for him to make the decision, and then Flint Raynor knew that it had been made. He knew it even before Corcoran's right hand dropped to the gun on his hip.

In two long leaps Flint reached one of the guards on his right. Preacher Davis moved with him, a great cat covering the ground with amazing speed. They hit the guards, smashing them against the wall, snatching the guns from their limp hands.

Flint slapped at the head of the man he'd downed, catching him on the side of the skull with the barrel of his Colt gun. In the middle of his leap he'd heard Corcoran's yell, and then a scattering of shots from the American crew.

Corcoran whirled. He was lining his gun on Don Justo, standing unarmed in front of him, when the rifles of the *vaqueros* cracked, almost in unison, a deafening sound.

Corcoran's body was almost lifted from the ground by the impact of dozens of bullets. He fell limply, literally torn to pieces, and he lay on the ground like a discarded rag doll.

As the Americans tried to return the fire on the wall, the *vaqueros* poured another volley into them, and about twenty-five men went down. Flint and the Preacher shot down two men who'd turned their weapons on them when they made their sudden break.

George Sloane had leaped on one of the guards, also, battering him to the ground. He was standing over the man, a gun in his hand, when the American crew made a break for the big gates. Don Justo called loudly:

"*Americanos*, drop your guns."

The *vaqueros* held up their fire, waiting, and the tough crewmen who'd come with Corcoran from Westport hesitated, looking at the dead and the dying men on the ground. Gradually, they complied.

Sloane walked over to Don Justo. He said quietly, "I owe you my life, Don Justo. Knowing what you do about me, you make me wonder why you saved it."

Don Justo smiled. He placed a fatherly hand on Sloane's shoulder. "The Lost Padre treasure has made a fool of you, *Señor* Sloane, but I do not condemn you. It has made fools of many men."

"I believe," George Sloane said, "that I can lead you to the Lost Padre Mine, Don Justo. It is on your land grant. You can give to me and to my men whatever portion you think we deserve for bringing you this information."

Flint stared at Sloane unbelievably. He noticed that the Don was still smiling, his hand on Sloane's shoulder.

"We shall have a look at the mine in the morning, my boy," he nodded. "What treasure you find you may still keep."

Now it was Sloane's turn to be surprised. He said slow-

ly, "You understand, Don Justo, that there may be millions in that lost mine."

The old man shrugged. "Can I eat gold?" he asked. "My wealth is in land, in cattle, in my people who love me. Can I ask for more than that?"

George Sloane looked at Flint, and then at Preacher Davis, who was slipping out of the velvet jacket which had split down the middle of the back when he'd made his leap at one of the guards.

The Preacher said, "The bleating of the Lord, it maketh rich, and it addeth no sorrow thereto."

They rode out in the morning, Sloane, the Preacher, Flint, Don Justo Almazon, and Carlita Fernandez. They rode due north, Carlita babbling over with excitement, her face flushed, eyes feverish.

"It is in the Valley of the Skulls," she kept saying.

"The Valley of the Skulls," Don Justo explained for the benefit of the Americans, "is a ten-mile long valley, a half-dozen miles north of my *hacienda*. Centuries ago a party of Spanish cavaliers were trapped in the Valley by Apaches, and destroyed to a man. Their skulls lay in the Valley for many years until I buried them."

As they climbed a slight rise, Carlita urged her horse on ahead. George Sloane followed her. She was calling back excitedly, "The Valley is just beyond this ridge, *Señors*."

Flint urged his horse after Carlita and Sloane, drawn on by the excitement of the moment. Somewhere in a crevice in the Valley of the Skulls lay the tunnel, the 'Lost Padre Mine', the wealth of centuries.

Don Justo and the Preacher came on more slowly. Carlita had stopped at the summit of the ridge. She was staring toward the north. Flint heard George Sloane say tensely,

"What is the matter? Don't tell me you've forgotten, Carlita?"

"The—the Valley!" the girl gasped. "The Valley of the Skulls!"

Flint sat on the horse next to Sloane. He looked toward the north, but there was no valley. He saw a jumbled mass of rock, sparsely covered with vegetation, a land so rough that it was impossible for a horse to go through it. The land was cracked and seamed, level with the land surrounding it.

"We can go around it," Sloane grated. "What's so terrible about this?"

Don Justo came up, smoking his cigarillo. He looked at the mass of rock before him, but he said nothing. Carlita turned to him beseechingly.

"The Valley," she almost wailed. "Where is the Valley, *Señor Almazon*?"

Don Justo took the cigarillo from his mouth. "I am afraid," he said softly, "that the hand of God has hidden the Lost Padre treasure forever, my friends."

Preacher Davis said one word, "Earthquake."

Flint turned to look at George Sloane. The Easterner was leaning forward in the saddle, gripping the pommel with both hands, the knuckles white. His face was white, too, strained. He stared at the mass of rock which once had been a deep valley. It was entirely filled in, overturned, jumbled into an unrecognizable pattern.

It was nearly a minute before Sloane spoke. He said quietly, "When did this happen, Don Justo?"

"Many years ago," Don Justo said. "I too heard Carlita's great grandfather speak of the location of the Lost Padre treasure. It was a little after Carlita was kidnapped and the old man was about to die. I too thought of finding the gold. But then came the earthquake. I took it as a sign—the old *padres* did not wish their gold to be found."

They were seated around the table that night with the light from the tall candles flickering on the silverware. They had finished eating and the Indian servants were taking the dishes away.

Don Justo leaned back in his chair. He said, "And now, *Señors*, what are your plans?"

George Sloane said, "I suppose we shall push on to California and the gold fields."

"You have heard," Don Justo stated, "of the new wagon route I intend to establish from my *hacienda* up in to California. I need *Americanos* to help me start that route. It is a big undertaking. I am offering the task to you—the three of you."

Flint stared at the old man. He saw Maria Teresa looking at him across the table, her eyes pleading with him. He needed no urging.

George Sloan leaned back in the chair and looked at his cigar. He glanced at Flint, and then at Maria Teresa. He said slowly:

"I am sure *Señor* Raynor would be the man for the job, Don Justo, with the Reverend Davis helping him establish the route."

"What of you?" Don Justo asked curiously.

"I should like to see the California gold fields," George Sloane grinned. "I understand you have a mule train going north in the morning. I should like your permission to accompany it. My men, too, are anxious to reach California."

"You have my permission," Don Justo nodded, "and may your luck be better than it has been here." He looked at Flint and he said, "What of you, *Señor* Raynor?"

"I should like to handle your wagons," Flint told him. "I should like to open that route and maintain it for you." He looked at the Preacher, "If the Preacher will blaze the first wagon trail."

Preacher Davis nodded. "That is new country to me," he said. "I should like a look at it."

In the morning, Flint watched the mules being loaded for the long journey north. Sloane had his wagons ready to roll, also. The mules were being led into the traces.

Sloane held out his hand when they were ready to go. He said to Flint, smiling a little, sincerity in his voice, "I'm glad I met you in Westport, Flint. Always good luck."

Flint gripped the Easterner's hand. "I hope you find the other end of the rainbow," he said.

Sloane looked toward the north. He said softly, "I doubt if I ever will, Flint, my boy, but I shall have a hell of a time looking for it."

Flint stood with Maria Teresa as the ten wagons rolled away from the *hacienda*. George Sloane was riding at the head of the column, following Don Justo's mule pack train.

"He is a very strange man," Maria Teresa murmured.

Flint watched the wagons, canvas tops yellow, worn from the long trip, big wheels rumbling. They were going up the ridge, disappearing over the top, very slowly in the bright morning sunlight.

Flint said slowly, "In his way, a good man."

They saw Preacher Davis sitting on a big boulder near the *hacienda* gate, watching the disappearing wagons. When they came up he said thoughtfully:

"To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven; a time to be born and a time to die; a time to plant and a time to pluck up that which is planted; a time to love—"

"Amen," Flint Raynor broke in.

A slow smile slid across the Preacher's face. It was almost a benediction as he said it:

"Amen, my young friends."

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