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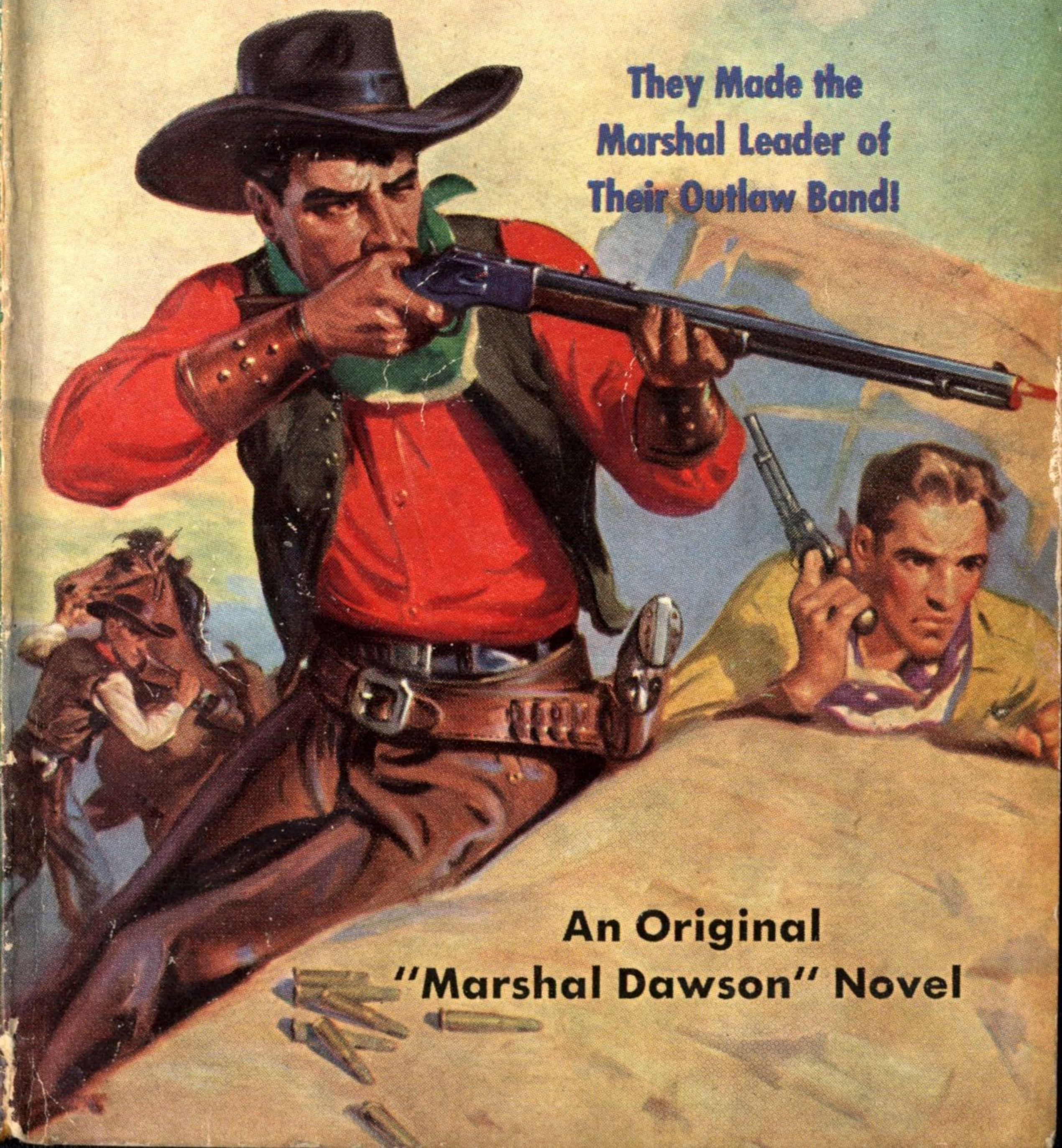
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TWO COMPLETE NOVELS 35c

KEN MURRAY

HELLIONS' HOLE

**They Made the
Marshal Leader of
Their Outlaw Band!**



**An Original
"Marshal Dawson" Novel**

May 1955
Lead
Bard



Mae

**ONCE IN THAT HIDDEN VALLEY, HE'D
BE MARKED FOR DEATH BY LAWMAN
AND LAWLESS ALIKE!**

There was only one way into the mountain valley that was the stronghold of the toughest gang of desperadoes since Butch Cassidy's. That was by joining their band. Yet Marshal Dawson, whose trail after a fortune in train loot had lead him directly to that Hole, knew that once he did so he'd be marked for shooting in the eyes of any lawman.

What happened when Dawson tossed his badge away and set out to prove to that gang that he too deserved a place on reward posters could well make frontier legend. For once inside, there'd be no way out for that reckless marshal.

Ken Murray, author of the movie and TV series of **THE MARSHAL'S DAUGHTER**, has turned out a terrific yarn about Marshal Dawson's toughest assignment—a top-notch ACE Original jammed with gun-fighting, thundering hoofs, and hairbreadth escapades.

*Turn this book over for a
second Ken Murray Western novel.*

CAST OF CHARACTERS

NICK RISK—Because he could beat up any man in that gang of scoundrels, he became its chief.

ISHMAEL COBB—A grim giant whose only loyalty was to the outlaw leader and whose only code was that of the killer.

BEN DAWSON—He unpinned his marshal's badge to match brain and brawn against men who never heard of fair fighting.

CALLIE PARSONS—This homesteader's daughter was more at home with a shotgun than with a powderpuff.

ED LONERGAN—The local sheriff took no chances where men from Hellions' Hole were concerned.

MARCUS BRANNER—When his temper finally snapped, this peace-loving citizen found himself leading a lynch mob.

HELLIONS' HOLE

A Marshal Dawson novel

by
KEN MURRAY

ACE BOOKS, INC.

23 West 47th Street, New York 36, N. Y.

HELLIONS' HOLE

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FEUD IN PINEY FLATS

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Printed in U.S.A.

Chapter One

HE RODE into Carthage just as dusk curtained the town. He sagged tiredly in the saddle, a dust-coated man in stiffly dirty clothes, with three days of white beard stubble on his thinned and drawn features. He was dead beat from the long ride up from Cheyenne and only his eyes moved, restlessly, sizing up the place.

It wasn't much of a town, he saw. A clutter of tin and tar-paper shacks scattered around the twin rows of one- and two-story buildings that lined the main drag. It didn't look much like the playground of some of the toughest owlhoot gangs that ever hid out in the notorious Hole-In-The-Wall country of the Big Horns, to the west.

Here and there behind store windows, lamps began to flicker on. Few people were in sight, though. A homesteader came out of the barber shop, buttoning his linsey-woolsey shirt and rubbing his freshly shaven face. He stared curiously for a moment at the lone rider moving down the street, then turned his head quickly when the rider looked his way. A couple of men stood in the doorway of the blacksmith's shop, talking, but their conversation subsided and they watched, uneasily, as the stranger rode by. It was a nervous town, the rider observed.

He saw that the Hammond Hotel was right next to the Four Leaf Clover saloon, just as he'd been told that it would be, and that the veranda roof protruded to the edge of the sagging, rotted board walk. There would be no need to change that part of his plans.

Reining in before the hotel, the rider eased stiffly from the saddle, groundhitched his chestnut gelding. A kid was sitting on the hotel porch, in a chair tipped back against the wall. He stopped his impudent staring and leaped to his feet and snatched at the coin flipped toward him as the stranger ordered him to lead the mount to the livery stable and have him fed and bedded down.

Inside the small, scantily furnished hotel lobby, the lamps were already lit and a walrus-mustached oldster, with turkey-wattle jowels, stood up and blinked his rheumy eyes unbelievably when the customer walked in.

"Yes, sir," he said, blowing dust from the registry. "Put you up for the night, mister? Fine rooms. Wash-bowl and fresh rain water in every room."

The stranger nodded, picked a quill pen from the ink bottle and scrawled his name on the register. The old clerk swung the book around and peered down at the scrawl. "Can't make out that name, mister. What might it be?"

"It might be Butch Cassidy."

The clerk's thin old shoulders twitched and jerked and he slammed the book closed nervously. He cocked his head and squinted closely at the new guest. Then he showed toothless gums in a nervous laugh. "Oh, no, 'tain't, mister. We know Cassidy and his bunch around here. They used to—"

"It might be Natey Champion or Nick Ray, either one."

The clerk chuckled less nervously this time. "You're pullin' m' leg, pilgrim. Ain't neither one o' them pair, neither, thank the Lord. Regulators killed both of 'em in '92, year before last."

"But it happens to be Dawson," the guest said. He pushed back his Stetson and revealed a shock of crisp prematurely white hair bushing out over his dusty forehead.

Bobbing his head and rubbing his withered hands together, the clerk told Dawson the price of the room, payable in advance, and took the money. As Dawson was about to move away, the clerk said: "What section you from? You're not from these parts, are you, Mr. Dawson?"

Without looking back, Dawson said: "Place where a man stays healthy by tendin' his own business. Make sure that's a front room you're takin' me to. I like to be able to look out on the street."

"Wouldn't advise that," the clerk said. "This is Saturday night. The Risk gang'll be ridin' into town any time now. They kick up a right mean fuss. You won't sleep very good in any front room."

"I want a front room," Dawson said sharply. "Nothin's goin' to bother my sleep any, tired as I am."

The clerk didn't answer but went bustling ahead of Dawson, jangling a ring of keys. Up on the second floor, he opened the room door and moved in and opened the window. The room was small and hot. There was nothing in it but an iron poster bed, a rickety dresser with a cracked and fly-specked mirror and one lopsided chair. Dawson thanked the clerk and waited until he had snut the door. Then he moved to the window and looked out. It faced right onto the roof of the veranda, the way he wanted it. He nodded grimly and turned back into the room.

On the dresser there was a huge, yellowish cracked pitcher and a bowl to match. Dawson took off his shirt and sluiced some of the water into the bowl. It looked gray and brackish. "Rain water, fresh," Dawson said, snorting.

He sluiced the tepid stuff over his face and head and scarred and compactly muscled torso and felt a little better. He put the dirty shirt back on and went over and flung himself on the hard and lumpy bed and within thirty seconds was snoring.

He didn't know how long he'd been asleep when the sound of shouting outside, awakened him. He came off the bed, instantly alert, shaking the last of the cobwebs out of his brain. His hands dropped to the walnut-stocked Colt .45's thonged low on his thighs, gunny-style, and he walked to the window and looked out.

Up and down the street, people were running toward stores and houses. Someone yelled: "They'll be here within the next few minutes. Get off the streets."

Dawson flung a boot over the window sill and crawled out onto the roof of the veranda. It was full dark now but a white slice of moon hung over the town, bathing it in a ghostly yellow glow. Next door at the Four Leaf Clover saloon, pine-knot flares cast flickering reddish glints across the hoof-packed dirt. Dawson crawled across the shadowed blackness of the roof to the edge and crouched there, looking toward the North end of the main street. He heard the hollering and whooping of the gang heading for the town, blown in on the night wind, before he spotted the great cloud of dust a half mile the other side of town.

Crouched there in the darkness, Dawson didn't let

himself think too much about what was going to happen in the next few minutes. If he timed it right and every move worked out, fine, he'd be a member of the infamous Risk gang. Then he'd be safe for a while, at least as long as he kept his wits about him. But if anything misfired right here at the beginning, he'd be sprawled out there with his blood seeping into the dust of Main Street, in short order.

The sound of the gang's pounding hoofs grew into a steady thunder but then the pace slowed a little as they came tearing into the town proper. Their yahooing faded, too. As the band of some thirty riders pounded toward the Four Leaf Clover, Dawson picked out the erect and wide-shouldered figure of their leader. He was not hard to spot. The moonglow glinted crazily from Nick Risk's glistening black boots and silver spurs and gem-studded saddle trappings.

Dawson ignored the others, and kept his gaze fixed on Risk. As the owlhoot leader rode his white stallion into the reddish wash of light from the saloon flares, directly beneath Dawson, the man on the roof reached down and whipped free one of his Colts. Then, springing lightly as a cat, he leaped from the roof edge.

He landed almost full on Nick Risk's back, his free arm around the outlaw's neck, pulling him free from the saddle and toppling with him into the dirt street as the horse cake-walked skittishly away. With his other hand Dawson jammed the barrel of the .45 into Risk's ribs. Over the other man's surprised oaths, Dawson said:

"Take it easy, Mr. Risk. I'm a friend. Give me a chance to prove it and you won't get hurt. If you don't, if any of your men try to shoot me or jump me, this six-gun will blast a cave in your ribs."

Both men lay sprawled in the dust without moving for a moment. Risk's men finally got over their surprise and several of them reached for the guns on their hips. Dawson ground the muzzle of the .45 deeper.

"Tell them to keep their paws away from those irons," he said. "The first one draws, you die, Risk. They'll get me but you'll go first. You want it that way or do you give me a chance to explain?"

Nick Risk swore and then said: "All right, damn it, I'll listen to your loco palaver. What choice do I have?"

Dawson kept his .45 firmly in Risk's ribs as both men scrabbled to their feet. Risk brushed dust and dirt from his previously immaculate whipcord breeches and hand-tailored silk shirt, but it didn't do much good. They were smudged with dirt and several spots of wagon spring grease. A few feet away lay his pearl-gray, flat-topped Stetson. Risk picked it up, brushed it off. In the glow of the pine-torch flares his young, sullenly handsome face was white with anger except for two reddish splotches of rage on his high cheekbones. With the back of one hand he brushed back the thick leonine mane of yellow hair that swept in thick waves from his broad, high forehead.

"Whatever the reason for that damfool stunt, it better be good, mister," he said, his voice tight with temper.

"I've got good reason, all right," Dawson told him. "Listen. I'm a friend of Hemp Waggoner's and I can prove it. He told me to come up here and join your bunch. Said you could always use a good man."

"We've got more men than we need right now," Risk answered. "Ought to thin out a little, instead of addin' to the bunch."

"I know that," Dawson said. "I'd heard how you shot up and choused a couple of strange gunnies who tried to join up with you at The Hole a few weeks ago. That's why I picked this way, to make sure I got a chance to talk to you, to let you read Hemp's letter."

Dawson reached inside his shirt and pulled out a folded, sweat-stained piece of brown paper. He unfolded it, glanced at the scrawled message on it and passed it to the outlaw leader.

While Nick Risk read the note, Dawson glanced around at the band of horsemen surrounding him. He tried to appear relaxed and at ease, but sweat started trickling down the small of his back. A nervous tic jumped in one cheek. This Risk gang was as rough a looking lot of hardcases as Dawson had ever seen thrown together. They were dirty and disheveled and bearded, in startling contrast to the well-groomed and dandified appearance of their leader.

Looking over that ring of faces it was not hard for Dawson to believe the fabulous exploits that he had heard about the gang. For the past half century the Hole-In-The-Wall section had harbored some of the most vicious gangs the West had ever known, the James boys, Flat Nose George Curry, Nate Champion, Harvey Logan and a host of others. But they were all supposed to be milksops compared to this Risk bunch. At this moment, Dawson had the feeling that none of those reports had been exaggerated. He knew that even if he got this first moment and was admitted to the gang, it would still be some time before he was fully accepted and trusted. For a moment despair filled him and he figured himself for the world's biggest fool to even try a suicidal stunt

like this. But then there was no more time to brood over it.

Nick Risk finished reading the letter and looked searchingly at Dawson. His eyes were a tawny brown color, under heavy lids with tiny hoods at their corners. The light from the saloon flares was caught and reflected in those eyes, shining on them as though on bottle glass. There was a cruelty and rugged determination and little humor in the set of Risk's thin, muscular lips. In spite of the outlaw leader's vanity about his looks, his supercilious concern over his dress, Dawson knew that here was a man as quick and dangerous as a trapped Gila monster.

"Ben Dawson, eh?" Risk said. "Used to be a town marshal in Arizona but got yourself into a heap o' trouble and had to take to the owlhoot trail, accordin' to Hemp Waggoner. They say once a lawman goes bad he really does a big job of it. So mebbe you are a hombre we can use. And I used to think a lot of ol' Hemp and owe him a few favors, so I reckon we'll take you in."

One corner of Risk's mouth tipped in a crooked smile. He added: "Well, what you waitin' for? Get that hawglaig out of my ribs and sheath it. We got some celebratin' to do. We didn't come into town just to stand around jawin' around. The boys been out there in The Hole for two weeks now. They crave a little recreation."

Dawson breathed a little sigh of relief, took his .45 from the other man's ribs and slipped it back into its leather. As soon as he did that, Nick Risk stepped back away, his eyes never leaving Dawson's. "All right, boys," he said, softly. "Cover this gent and one of you slip up behind him and remove his hardware."

Instantly three of the Risk bunch whipped out their guns. Another man slipped from his lathered mount and moved up behind Dawson. For a moment Dawson thought about digging for his own irons again and trying to fight his way out of this double-cross, but it was only a thought bred of desperation and he abandoned it almost immediately. He wouldn't have stood a chance.

"What the hell kind of deal is this?" Dawson said as he felt his .45's being removed from their holsters.

Nick Risk and some of his men laughed. "It ain't as easy as all that to join the Risk gang," Nick told him. "Sure, I'll take Hemp's word for it that you're all right—until I find out otherwise, anyhow. But every member of this outfit's got to prove his salt before he's taken in."

The hammering in Dawson's heart slowly quieted down. With an air of bravado he didn't really feel, he said: "All right, what do you want me to do? Name any kind of test or contest you want. I'll prove I can rope or ride or shoot with the best of any of your bunch."

Nick Risk unbuckled his silver-studded gunbelt. He handed it to one of his men. "Unhitch your gunbelt, too, Dawson," he said. "I've got my own way of testin' a man's mettle. Way I figger, a hombre can be a fast man with a gun but that doesn't necessarily mean he's got real guts. There's only one way of fighting that shows what a man's really made of. That's with the fists. I fight every new member of my outfit before he joins. If he puts up a good scrap, he's in. If he doesn't, I don't want him around." He rubbed his hands together in a gesture that was almost a caress—as if the hands themselves were about to find pleasure by pounding at a man's flesh. His eyes probed

malignantly at the stranger. "Put up your hands, Dawson."

Dawson hesitated. He looked around at the faces of the men now ringed in a wide circle around him and Risk. Not one of them showed any friendliness, gave him any reassurance. One of the men, a big, bony-shouldered man with a welted scar down one cheek, drawled:

"He ain't goin' to give you much trouble, Nick, not an old time Eastern carnival fighter like you. Polish him off quick and let's get on with the rest of the night's fun."

Dawson understood now. Just as he himself had sought a novel, if startling, approach to get into Risk's tightly knit band, so Risk had his own unusual method of testing a new man. But it wasn't really so much a test, Dawson realized, as it was a means of providing Risk with a certain unholy pleasure in beating up a man. A double pleasure—because Risk no doubt got as much joy in performing before his band as in demolishing an opponent with his superior fighting skill.

But Dawson didn't have much time to speculate along these lines, for Risk was dancing toward him, his fists cocked in fighting position. He darted out a fast left hand, punching it lightly against Dawson's right shoulder, shoving him off balance. With puma-like quickness, then, Risk moved in and threw his other fist toward Dawson's jaw. Just in time Dawson twisted his head and the blow merely grazed his cheek.

The unfair suddenness of the attack galled Dawson and as anger began to build in him, he stepped back and met Risk's next rush by jolting his own left fist solidly against the taller man's heart. Risk grunted

and danced away, the condescending smile slipping from his face and new respect flashing into his brown eyes. Both men circled warily for awhile, feeling each other out. Then suddenly Nick Risk blazed in, feinted with his left and threw a sizzling right that sneaked through over Dawson's guard and crashed against his jaw. He spun in a half-circle and fell.

Dully, through a roaring in his ears, Dawson heard the victorious howling of the gang surrounding them. He shook his head and cleared his vision in time to see Nick Risk come leaping down toward him as he lay sprawled in the dirt, to finish him off.

Dawson got one boot up just in time. It caught Risk in the chest and sent him hurtling backward. Dizzily Dawson scrabbled back to his feet. He didn't wait for Risk to come after him again. He tore toward the other man. Risk was still struggling awkwardly, hands flailing, to hold his balance. Dawson smashed through a solid right that caught Risk high on the cheekbone. He followed it through with a left which was blocked. Risk, his balance recovered, now, stuck out his long left arm, jabbing Dawson repeatedly, forcing him backward. At the same time, Risk circled cleverly to his own left, keeping away from Dawson's wild right-hand swings.

One of Dawson's eyes was half closed now. Blood was flowing freely from his nose and down his throat, partially choking him, making it difficult to breathe. He realized that Risk, with his professional experience as a fighter, was much too clever a boxer to be beaten at long range like this. If Dawson was going to get anywhere, it would have to be in close, with a punishing body attack.

As Risk's long left flicked into his face again, this time, instead of trying to get away from it, Dawson

covered his face and rushed in close. He caught the taller man by surprise. He sunk his right fist in a short, jolting blow to Risk's thin middle. Risk grunted and bent at the waist. Dawson threw a volley of punches, then, with both hands, at the same spot. Risk managed to block some of the punches but enough of them got through to double him up, empty him of breath. He backed away from Dawson, pale and gasping, hung forward like a man leaning over a rail.

Dawson knew he had the outlaw leader then. He stalked him, feinting, waiting for the right opening to throw in the finishing punch. The crowd surrounding the two men were quiet now and tense. The sudden turn of events against their leader, Dawson's savage counter-fighting in close, had caught them by surprise.

Finally Dawson saw his opening as Risk's left arm dropped a little from in front of his jaw. Dawson brought a punch up from his boot-tops, putting every bit of weight and power in his compact body behind the blow, to make sure that this one would end it. But just as he shifted his feet to get better leverage, his bootheel twisted in a deep wagon rut and threw him off balance. Instead of catching Risk flush on the jaw, the punch landed high on the side of his head. It sent a streak of pain all up Dawson's arm as his knuckles were jammed back. At the same time, the fury of this off-balance blow sent him staggering sideways, awkwardly.

By the time Dawson recovered his balance, Nick Risk was also sufficiently recovered to take advantage of the situation. He threw a wild, overhand right that nailed Dawson squarely between the eyes, stunned him. As the lights of the town pinwheeled before his

vision, excruciating pain ripped upward from his groin as Risk moved in and hooked a fist in hard and low. The next punch he threw landed against Dawson's jaw. The pinwheeling lights suddenly exploded in a burst of fireworks

It seemed to Dawson that he was caught up in the swirling, rushing torrent of a flood ravaged river. He was trying to swim but it was a wasted effort. He kept going under. He was buffeted this way and that. Every time he tried to grab hold of something, his hands slipped off. Every time he opened his mouth to breathe, gallons of water seemed to rush into his lungs, choking him. Just when it seemed that his lungs would burst, the dream ended and Dawson came rushing back to consciousness.

Two men were holding him, one by the back of the shirt, the other forcing his head down into the stale water of a horse trough. Dawson struggled feebly, and one of the men said: "He's all right now. He's come out of it. For a moment I was beginnin' to think Risk had near killed him."

They set Dawson free and he stayed there by the side of the trough, getting some of his strength back. He smeared water from his face and shook it from his hair. Slowly, he got back to his feet and stood there, swaying. He looked at the two owlhoots who were watching him, big grins on their faces.

One of them was tall and lanky as a strip of stringy rawhide. The skin was drawn tightly over the bone structure of his face, giving him a skull-like appearance. His eyes cut outward in opposite directions. His grin showed half-rotted, scraggly teeth.

The second man was short and almost as broad as he was high. He had a square, stolid-looking face

with a heavily muscled jaw. His arms and legs seemed as thick and powerful as oak limbs. But there was a good-natured twist to his mouth and his gray eyes regarded Dawson with friendliness and a touch of admiration. He stuck out a big, square, hairy-backed hand and said:

"My handle's Mike Scoggins. This here ugly string-bean is Walleye Thompson. Shake, mister. You put up a mighty good scrap. You hadn't run into hard luck and footslipped, you might have given the boss his first whippin'."

"Naw," Walleye drawled. "Not a chance. Ain't nobody can whup that blasted Nick Risk. Not fist-fightin'. But this monkey did give him a good run for his money while it lasted."

Dawson shook hands with both men and looked around. The gang's horses were all hitched outside the Four Leaf Clover. From inside there came the tinny banging of a piano and a lot of loud jumbled talk and laughter.

"Nick said to bring you inside if we ever got you conscious again," Mike Scoggins said. "He wants to talk to you."

Dawson nodded and trailed the other two toward the saloon. Inside, the place was already filled with smoke. Some of the Risk gang were crowded at the bar. Others sat at scattered tables and a few clustered around the piano where one of the bunch was playing bawdy barroom ballads. Scoggins gestured toward a table where Nick Risk sat with a girl. Still a little wobbly-legged, Dawson ambled toward the outlaw leader. When Risk saw Dawson approaching, he said something to the girl and jerked his thumb toward the rear of the place. The girl, a brassy-haired blonde in a too low-cut flame-red gown, tossed her head and

pouted, her coarsely pretty and heavily made-up face sullen. But she rose and left, swinging her hips provocatively as Dawson reached the table.

Nick Risk, his ego and fight lust sated, now grinned and reached out a hand toward Dawson. "You did all right," he said. "Good clean fight."

Dawson wanted to tell him it had been anything but that, the way Risk had taken advantage of his slipping and weakened him with a low blow to the groin, but he kept his mouth shut. He shrugged and nodded and sat down at the table.

Risk took Hemp Waggoner's note out of his pocket. He said: "We can't take any chances, Dawson. I reckon you're all right, but suppose you answer a few questions. Start off by tellin' me all you know about Hemp."

Quickly Dawson described the man who had written his note of recommendation to Risk, then said: "Ol' Hemp was a roustabout with the same carnival you worked with, when you first met him. Later he got into trouble over some girl and left. You didn't see him for several years, until after you killed and robbed the carny owner and hit out for the West. Hemp finally knifed a river barge captain in Naw-lins and came out here and looked you up. He was with you when you stuck up a mail train in Omaha for twenty thousand. He was on the Express office job at Hell's Hinge, too. But right after you pulled a heist of a gold bullion shipment and killed the stage driver and two shotgun guards, Hemp took off for Arizona and bought himself a dance hall in a mining town and married one of the girls who worked for him. That's where I met him. He hid me out there for a couple of weeks after I got into a jam in the town where I was marshal. When they got wind of where I

was holin' up, Hemp told me to hit for the Hole country and look you up. That about does it, I reckon. Any more information you'd like to hear?"

All the time Dawson had been talking, Nick Risk's tawny brown eyes had seemed to bore right through him. When he finished Risk said: "That'll do. Mind your business, do as you're told and don't start any trouble and you'll get along all right with us. Don't know how long we're goin' to stick at The Hole but as long as we do, you're safe with us. Nobody bothers us around this section. We're too big and strong. When we need beef and other stuff for grub, we raid one of the small spreads and homesteads. When we hanker for a little fun, we hit into town here. We'll be headin' back for The Hole tomorrow sometime. Now go mix in with the boys and have yourself some fun." He grinned and winked. "I got some private business to discuss with that hunk o' blonde dynamite."

Dawson left the table and pushed into the group at the bar, between Mike Scoggins and Walleye, who introduced him to other members of the bunch. Some of them were friendly but others seemed rather hostile, and Scoggins told him that they were discontented, felt that they'd been holed up in the Red Wall country too long.

"Especially the ten original members of Risk's bunch. They figger it's safe now to divvy up the boodle on that last railroad job and scatter and live a life of luxury for awhile with all that dinero."

"I heard about that last job the Risk bunch pulled," Dawson said. "They got nearly a hundred thousand in new government currency, I understand."

Scoggins looked at him sharply. "About eighty-five thousand, I heard. I wouldn't ask too many questions

about that, if I were you. It's a touchy subject. Risk has got that bale of money cached somewhere in The Hole. Everybody's a little nervous about that. They're afraid one of us might accidentally stumble on it and take off with the whole jackpot, solo. If you get too nosy about that stack of hidden greenbacks, someone's liable to get the notion that's why you wanted to join us, to try and find it for yourself. Man could get himself loaded with hot lead very quickly that way."

Dawson laughed. "Thanks for the tip, anyhow, Mike, but I'm not looking for money right now. All I'm interested in is keepin' my skin whole for awhile."

After a few drinks, Dawson was able to slip away under some pretense and went back to his own room at the hotel. He needed a good night's sleep badly. He'd need a clear head tomorrow. And every day from now on if he intended to stay alive. It was over an hour, though, before he fell into troubled sleep. He kept wondering and worrying about the days ahead and how he was going to fit in with a tough and deadly owlhoot gang like the Risk bunch. He tried not to think about what would happen if something went wrong and the outlaws found out who he really was and why he had joined them.

Twice during the night, Dawson was awakened by the sound of fighting out on the street and the heavy slam of sixgun fire. But he kept to his bed and didn't go to the window. Like they'd told him, the better he minded his own business the safer he would be.

Chapter Two

THE NEXT morning, Ben Dawson was jarred awake by the sound of pounding on the door. Someone rattled the knob furiously. Just as Dawson swung out of bed and started for the door, something rammed hard against it from the other side. The wood around the lock splintered and the door slammed shudderingly open. One of the biggest men Dawson had ever seen filled the doorway. Dawson stood staring at him, stupefied.

The man had to duck to avoid bumping his head on the door-top. He had a long, muscular neck, with a prominent Adam's apple. Under a blue workshirt, his great shoulders sloped into arms as long and powerful as a gorilla's. He wore levis and dusty black boots but in spite of the usual Western garb he looked nightmarishly out of place whether it was his closely shaved bald head, the small brass earrings that dangled from his long-lobed ears or the Mongolian cast to his eyes, or the combination of all these things, Dawson wasn't sure. All he knew was that in that first moment, looking at this man, Dawson was partially paralyzed with fright.

Somehow, though he managed to demand roughly: "What the hell's the idea of breakin' in the door? I was just going to open it."

"You took too long," the big man said. He spoke in a deep-throated singsong tone that had an almost mesmeric effect. "I am not accustomed to being kept waiting by anybody." He started across the room toward Dawson.

Dawson reached to his gunbelt hanging over the back of the chair, and yanked out one of his .45's. The giant put out a hand, palm first and stopped a few feet away from Dawson. His slightly slanting, yellowish eyes looked down disdainfully at the weapon. He said:

"Put that away. If I was planning to harm you, I wouldn't let that stop me. My name is Ishmael Cobb. I'm Nick Risk's right-hand man and his personal bodyguard. I didn't come into town last night with the others. When I arrived here this morning, Nick told me about you. I wanted to speak with you personally, to size you up."

"Oh, yes," Dawson said. "Hemp Waggoner told me about you. I'd forgotten about it. Said Nick once saved your life or something, back in the days when you both worked in a carnival and that you were devoted to Nick. You were posing as an Indian fakir or something with the carny, weren't you?"

The yellowish eyes glittered but no change of expression followed on the big man's bland face. Studying him more closely, now, Dawson was amazed at all the facets that made this man's appearance so striking. At first you were overwhelmed by his huge size so that it was a while before you took him all in and realized just how unusual looking he was. In contrast to his closely shaven head, his brows were thick and scraggly, and tufts of black hair protruded from his large ears. The sleeves of his shirt were rolled to the biceps and on each hairy, powerful forearm

was a brilliant tattooing job in the form of weird, multi-armed Oriental goddesses. In addition to the twin sixguns he wore about the hips, a large knife with a fancily carved handle was hung in a scabbard from his belt.

"You have certainly been well briefed, Mr. Dawson," Cobb said at last in his precise, ornate speech. "You possess a lot of information about us."

"What does that mean?" Dawson said.

"Draw any conclusion you wish," Cobb said. His thin-lipped mouth writhed like a small pink snake as he talked, deliberately pronouncing each word separately, correctly.

"Sounds as though you might think I'm tryin' to pull some kind o' double deal."

Cobb shrugged his huge shoulders. "Let us say that words are sometimes meaningless. I do not judge a man by what he says. I can tell a lot by looking at him and watching him. And my first impression of you is not good. I have the feeling you're not really one of us. I can't explain that. But the feeling is there and I cannot get rid of it. I shall report that to Nick but he'll probably laugh it off. Nevertheless, if my intuition is right, you'll give yourself away sooner or later. If it turns out I'm wrong, I'll extend my humble apologies."

"Look, Cobb," Dawson said. "You could probably break me in half like a matchstick but that doesn't mean I'm going to take any insults off you. Let's get that straight to start off with. Are you calling me a liar?"

"I called you nothing. I make no accusations. I merely told you how I feel after meeting you. Possibly I shall change that feeling later. We shall see. By the way, the bunch will be ready to start back for the

Red Wall country in a couple of hours. Be ready to ride with the others at that time."

Cobb then touched his bunched fingertips to his forehead and turned with slow but amazing grace for such a great hulk of a man and walked out of the room. Dawson sat on the edge of the bed for long moments, staring at the still open door, going back over the scene that had just occurred, thinking about the things that had been said. He rubbed his white beard-stubbed jaw reflectively. He finally forced thoughts of the big man out of his mind. Now was no time to get boogered by some big lunkhead talking a lot of mystical-sounding gibberish. And that's all it was, Dawson convinced himself. It couldn't be anything else but the naturally over-suspicious workings of the Oriental mind, with its natural distrust of strangers, those whose qualities were still unproven.

Dawson dressed, then shaved and left the hotel. He found the livery and saddled up his big chestnut and rode back down to the Four Leaf Clover saloon, where the sounds of ribald and drunken laughter and singing were just as loud as they'd been the night before. Directly across the street, three bodies had been neatly stacked one on top of the other. Dawson looked at them curiously, recognized that they were three of the Risk bunch. As he was doing this, Nick Risk crossed the street toward him, accompanied by Ishmael Cobb. Although Risk was taller than average, he looked undersized next to Cobb's great height and bulk.

"Ish," Risk said, "Clean the gang out of the saloon. We've got to get going."

Without a word, Cobb turned and headed toward the saloon. Coming up to Dawson, Risk said: "I hear you had a visitor this morning." A wry grin twisted

his mouth. "Ish tells me he doesn't like your looks. He somehow doesn't think you're what you're supposed to be, Dawson. He figures you for some kind of impostor."

Dawson didn't answer for a moment. He looked long and steadily into Risk's tawny brown eyes. Then he said: "I know. He told me as much." He shrugged. "Mebbe I don't like his looks, either. But I don't want any trouble. You make up your mind right now, Mr. Risk. If you want to go along with Cobb's opinion of me, I'll just clear out. I can find some place else to hole up, I reckon. It's more dangerous lone-handing it. But I won't take to that big hyena putting the evil eye on me all the time, nor gettin' you stirred up against me."

Risk's eyes narrowed appraisingly. "You've got guts, Dawson. I like a hombre who speaks his mind. Until Ish Cobb can dig up some facts to back his suspicions, I'll go along with your story. I'll stake my life on that note you brought actually being written by Hemp Waggoner. And, if you're not on the level, I don't see what you can gain by joining us."

He glanced toward the dead men piled at the edge of the road. "Some of the men got around to settling some long-time differences last night when the whiskey got to workin' on 'em."

"What you goin' to do with 'em?"

Risk shrugged. "Leave 'em there. The town's got a Boothill. They'll bury 'em for us." He spat toward the dead men. "What'd you think, we're goin' to cart 'em back to The Hole and give 'em a fancy funeral?"

From the saloon across the street, drunken men were beginning to pour out. Some of them carried bottles; all of them looked disheveled and raw-eyed from all-night drinking. Most of them could hardly

navigate. One of them shouted: "Nick, how 'bout bein' a right good fella and leavin' us stay another day in town? We's just beginnin' to whoop it up a little. Don't go ornery on us and make us leave so early."

Nick Risk didn't answer. He didn't have to. Ishmael Cobb answered for him. He came pushing through the batwings, lugging a passed-out drunk under each arm, carrying them as easily as though they were rag dolls. He stopped behind the man who had shouted at Risk and carefully raised one big boot and placed it in the small of the man's back and pushed. The drunk went sprawling off the veranda and into the dirt of the street on his face.

Cobb asked: "Is there anybody else who wishes to argue with the boss about whether it's time to leave town?"

There was no answer from the drunken mob standing in front of the saloon. Sheepishly, they unhitched their mounts, crawled into the saddles and sat there, swaying listlessly. Meanwhile, Cobb lugged the two men he was carrying to the horse trough a few doors up the street and tossed them both unceremoniously into the water. They revived quickly and crawled out, swearing and spluttering as Cobb went back into the saloon for another load.

Risk told Dawson: "If we stayed here another hour, they'd all be so likkered up you couldn't get one of them into the saddle. All this town would need would be to catch the whole bunch passed out on me. They've been waitin' for a chance like that. They'd back-shoot me and Ish and toss the rest of 'em into the pokey and send for a U. S. marshal."

Cobb made two more trips into the saloon to carry out pairs of limp and snoring figures, sobered them somewhat by way of a dousing in the water trough,

and Nick Risk signalled that the bunch was ready to take off. Cobb brought Risk's white stallion from the livery, and strung out in double file, they rode down the length of Main Street and out of the town. As they went, Dawson noticed blinds in some of the stores and houses being furtively drawn back and knew that there many sighs of relief being breathed at the owlhooters' departure.

At first, Dawson rode in the middle of the bunch while Ishmael Cobb and Risk rode up front. But after a while Risk called to him to ride up front with them. He said: "You got nobody to talk with back there. That bunch's all too tired or too drunk to make any sensible palaver. And I crave a little mouth exercise, m'self. Big Ish, here, he's not much help at that. Anything I say, he just grunts or nods his head."

As Dawson joined them, riding on the other side of Risk, he looked across at Cobb. The big man's cold yellow gaze held his for a moment and then turned away. After that he didn't look at Dawson again or acknowledge his presence, even though at first Dawson directed some of his talk toward him.

"Don't mind him," Risk said. "He's a fine rascal to have sidin' you in any kind of a tight and he's as loyal as the day is long, but he ain't much conversationally. Broods sometimes until he like to drive me loco."

From then on, Risk did most of the talking. He told a lot of stories about some of the notorious outlaws he had met or ridden with. "You ever hear tell about the time Butch Cassidy and Flat Nose George Curry robbed the Northern Pacific of over forty thousand dollars?"

"Yuh," Dawson said. "Somethin' about it. They were tickled over makin' such a big haul until they found out that they'd got brand new banknotes, still

unsigned by the president and cashier. Wasn't that it?"

"Yes. Every blasted dollar of it, worthless. Any man who'd tried to spend one of 'em would have been tossed right into the hoosegow or mebbe shot down on the spot. But they sure did have a time with that money while they were hiding out. They played the highest stake poker games ever heard of. The winner of every pot would then take a high figure gold note and use it to light his quirly. You ever meet Butch?"

"No," Dawson said.

"Quite a gent. Real name's George LeRoy Parker. Used to be a Mormon cowpuncher. Good-natured hombre, always grinnin' and laughin' and ready to raise seven kinds o' hell. Not near as tough a customer as a lot of people think, not like Curry and Harvey Logan and some of the others."

Just then they passed a half-broken down shack off to the right and Risk pointed to it and said: "Right there's the cabin where the Regulators cornered Nate Champion and Nick Ray last year. Now there were a couple of really raw killers. Some of their boys are in my bunch right now. Champion came from a kind of high and mighty Texas family, I understand. Lot of folks say he was the most dangerous gunfighter ever ran loose in Wyoming. I wouldn't know. Never crossed guns with him."

Later, as they rode deeper into the Big Horns, the long straggling group of horsemen found the going much slower as the terrain grew more rocky. The grass of the low country gave way to sagebrush and rabbit brush. The trail twisted and bent, wound through gullys and gulches. Behind Dawson, Risk and Cobb, the fast sobering men began to curse and fuss at the long, tedious journey. A number of times

they stopped for water. At one of these times, the tall lanky man with the huge welted scar down one cheek pointed to a rise of ground to the right.

"Right over there is where we fought the battle with Dull Knife," he said, gesturing. He touched his scarred cheek. "That was where I got this."

"You goin' to fight that battle over again, Gus," another member of the band said. "We only heard it a hundred times already."

"Well, mebbe this new feller ain't," Gus said, surly. "None of you gophers ever was soljers or you'd have things like that to remember and be proud of, too." He turned toward Dawson who showed an interested expression. He knew that soon he'd need all the friends he could get in the bunch. The older man went on:

"You never saw such a massacre. It was right after the Custer battle and Dull Knife and Little Wolf led the Cheyenne and Arapaho around here. It was near the end o' November, I remember, when our boys under General Mackenzie surrounded Dull Knife's camp, over there on the Red Fork of the Powder. Just before daylight about a thousand or so of us surprised them sleeping Cheyenne and drove them from their lodges. Well, sir, they rallied in the hills later and put up a rugged battle for a while. But we'd destroyed their camp and their supplies. It was bitter cold that year, with a lot of snow. The Cheyenne who were left—men, women and children, some of 'em almost naked—left a trail of blood behind 'em as they hiked to the Sioux camp of Crazy Horse, almost seventy miles away. Later, in their camp we found a lot of articles that had belonged to Custer's men, so we didn't have much pity for 'em."

Dawson nodded "You in many other campaigns?"

"No, sir, that winter was enough for me of the Army. I took French leave right after that." He gave a dry, cackling laugh. "Reckon they're still lookin' for me for desertion, even though that was way back in seventy-six."

"All right, cut the jabber, mount up and let's ride," Nick Risk called out.

Wearily the men got back into their saddles and the long trek began once again. Now, even Nick Risk was too tired to talk. A few hours later they came to Red Canyon, the fabulous Hole-In-The-Wall, the great gap washed through the Red Wall by the Middle Fork of Powder River. The wall, itself, was a jutting fault some thirty-five miles long that ran almost straight south and then bent to the west. It was the wildest looking, most Godforsaken country Dawson had ever ridden through. It was obvious why the section had long been a safe refuge for the most vicious gangs of cutthroats. Its narrow entrance, Dawson saw, could easily be protected from invasion by a small group of armed men. And some of the dead-end cuts and canyons that branched off from the Wall, were even more inaccessible, if properly protected.

Several miles along The Wall, they rode up toward a narrow cut, the entrance to which was almost closed in by huge boulders. As they neared it, Risk told Dawson: "This is our hideout. Hellions' Hole, it's called. The devil help any one who ever tries to root us out of here."

Risk drew one of his fancily tooled sixguns from its holster. He fired five shots into the air, the first two spaced widely apart, the last three in staccato succession. As soon as the sound of the echoes faded, small figures were seen to move out from behind the

rock outcroppings. They were all heavily armed, both with sixguns and rifles, with extra belts of cartridges strapped across their chests. They waved and shouted something, and the bunch from town hollered back at them, the echoes bouncing back and forth off the canyon walls.

Just before they reached the entrance to the cut, Dawson saw a sun-whitened skeleton dangling from a noose strung over the limb of a cottonwood tree. He jerked his thumb toward it, said: "Who was that?"

Nick Risk grunted. "Railroad detective we caught tryin' to slip into The Hole one night. After the vultures stripped his carcass clean, we left him swingin' there, figurin' it might stop anybody else who'd want to try the same trick."

Dawson looked at the grisly bones swinging gently in the evening breeze. Something glittered from the basket of its ribs. "We pinned his badge back onto his bones," Risk said.

Laughing uneasily, Dawson said: "He didn't deserve any better."

Some of the entrance guards came down and joined the group as they rode past the entrance to The Hole. They reported that there'd been no trouble and hoorawed some of the others about their hangover looks and the whiskey they'd swilled in town. They hoped a little bit had been left for their bunch when it was their turn for an outing next week.

Hellions' Hole, Dawson saw, as they rode deeper into it, was boxed in at the far end by a sheer precipice, from the middle of which boiled a waterfall fed by some underground river. One glance showed Dawson that there was obviously no entrance or escape from this narrow cut from that end. Above the falls the precipice rose sheer and unclimbable, even

by mountain goats, for several hundred feet. He saw that this outlaw sanctuary was also a trap for anyone caught in here who might want to get out. There was no way out, except past the heavily guarded entrance.

Alongside the narrow but fast rushing creek fed by the Falls, the outlaw camp was set up. There was a corral for the horses, made of unpeeled poles, one large shack-like building where the gang ate in bad weather and a number of smaller wooden shacks as well as lean-tos made of tarpaulin and old blankets. Several campfires were already lighted and about six or seven men, alternates for the other guards at the entrance, greeted the new arrivals. Risk introduced Dawson, saying that he was a friend of Hemp Waggoner's, and for the most part the men seemed to accept him without question. Several of them had known Waggoner at some time or other and asked Dawson how Hemp was doing.

That night, after chow, Mike Scoggins and the man called Walleye came over to the spot where Dawson had built a lean-to of his own and hunkered down beside his campfire. As they lit cigarettes, Scoggins said:

"You're goin' to have trouble with that big Ish Cobb, I reckon, Dawson. He don't take to you for some reason. He ain't exactly sayin' anything against you, but he ain't sayin' anything in your favor either. He's sort o' givin' out the impression that he don't trust you. It don't bother me any, because I don't care nothin' about big Ish, myself. But if some o' the boys treat you kinda cold for a while, I thought you might like to know why it is. Ish carries a lot of weight in this camp. Lot o' these hombres are deadly afraid of him. Heard talk that he has supernatural

powers, even, but that's a lot o' donkey dust, as anyone with good sense knows."

"I know," Dawson said. "I had a sort of run-in with him this morning. Maybe I can figure some way to convince him that I'm all right. I'll have a try at it, anyhow."

The next few days, Dawson made every possible effort to befriend Ishmael Cobb but without success. The big man remained cold to all his approaches. At the same time Dawson noticed that all but a few of the gang, men like Mike Scoggins and Walleye, also seemed to shun his company. It was as though they were taking their cue from Ish Cobb's actions. When Dawson approached a group they would immediately stop their conversation. There would be a big, meaningful silence until Dawson moved away again. All this in spite of the fact that Dawson readily fell into the camp routine, pulled guard duty, did his share of kitchen work, including killing and dressing several beeves stolen from a ranch outside the Wall country. He went out of his way to ignore the hostility, too, and to be pleasant to the other men, to go out of his way to do favors for any of them whenever possible. But none of it worked. Cobb had sowed the seeds of suspicion and distrust too deeply.

But during that week, too, Dawson noticed that there was a seething uneasiness and unrest among at least half the men in the camp. It was under the surface, hidden, but it was there. Dawson could see it and hear it in the occasional grumbling of this group, the sluggish and resentful way in which they took orders. The core of this segment of the camp was the ten or twelve men who were members of the original Risk gang, who had helped him in their last railroad holdup. From little veiled hints and innuendos over-

heard here and there, even though he could not arouse suspicion by probing or asking questions, Dawson learned that these men, among them Mike Scoggins and Walleye Thompson, were increasingly worried about the cached eighty-five thousand dollars from that last haul.

Nick Risk had told them that he and Cobb had hidden the money and were holding onto it for the protection of the men themselves. If he split it up with them before the excitement about the robbery died down a little, some of them would be tempted to take off from The Hole, would try to get back to civilization and spend some of the money. And they'd get caught and be jailed or killed. Even if they didn't leave the Hole, they'd probably gamble away most of their end to some of the other new members of the gang.

Risk told them to be patient, that it wouldn't be much longer. But that logic was beginning to wear thin. There was little the men could do about it, though, because only Nick Risk and Ishmael Cobb knew where the money was hidden.

But at the end of the first week that Dawson was a member of the Risk gang, he thought he saw a chance to win a few needed friends—and at the same time gain a little freedom to do some private reconnoitering.

Somewhere out in Red Canyon, Nick Risk and Ish Cobb had rounded up a bunch of wild horses and brought them back to the corral. Risk then announced that to break the monotony of camp life, they'd hold their own private bronco busting contest. The prize for the winner would be two weeks' freedom from guard duty and all other camp chores, the man making the poorest showing to be saddled with

double duty. Any private betting that went on between the men was up to themselves.

Dawson recognized this at once as the opportunity—however hazardous it turned out—to learn what he had come here to discover.

There were six horses in the bunch brought in. They were all wild-eyed broomtails, big and rangy and full of fire and brimstone. But one stood out from the others. He was a big black, all meat and gristle, the ideal bucking horse, cold-blooded, pig-eyed and deep-chested. He caught the fancy of the whole Risk gang immediately when he had to be cut off and isolated from the others because of his mean actions. They nicknamed him Big Satan. Nick Risk, himself, watching this big black decided that no one man would ever ride him tame and he was eliminated from the contest.

The men then all drew lots to see in which order they would mount. A point system was rigged up. Five points for any man who gentled a horse, first try, all by himself. Three points for second try and two points for the third. One point would go to any contestant who managed to stay on a horse for more than one minute.

When all the details were arranged and all the stuff gathered together that would be needed for saddling the fantails, Nick Risk shouted: "All right you mangy bunch of would-be bronc peelers, let's get to it!"

The first contestant was a bandy-legged little man named Jonesy. He picked a comparatively quiet looking roan, which gave little fight to the roping and when snubbed to a corral pole, was easy to saddle. But no sooner did Jonesy fork into the saddle than the roan acted as though somebody had suddenly

built a fire under her. She bucked and sunfished half a dozen times in ten seconds. Jonesy was swung around sideways and then tilted halfway off the saddle. With the next wild leap he went flying from the back of the roan and landed on his rump.

The little fellow was game, though. He slowly got to his feet, ignoring the jibes and laughter, and signalled for the roan to be roped again. This time when he climbed onto the leather, the leaping roan wasn't nearly so spirited. Jonesy managed to stay on two full minutes before being caught by one last sunfishing leap just as he thought he had the roan gentled. This time he landed heavily and lay stunned for several moments before some of the others picked him up. But suddenly he shook his head and walked away from the corral, unaided.

There were three more contestants before it would become Ben Dawson's turn. He watched the rides closely. Here was a chance made to order to win some friends in case of a showdown. Dawson knew that if he could win this contest it would help him gain the respect of the whole camp. If there was one thing a bunch of owlhoots frankly admired it was a man with savvy and guts enough to master a fantail first try out. Dawson had an idea that unless there was some outstanding rider in the group, he might be able to take first prize. Back in the days when he'd had his own spread, he'd done a lot of bronc-peeling on some of the wildest horse flesh in Arizona.

But one of the next three men, a handsomely built young man with wide shoulders, tapering down into boyish waist and hips and long powerful legs, showed Dawson that here was one hombre who was going to give him a close run for his money. This Lester Troy was full of cockiness. He put on a terrific exhibi-

tion, easily breaking the roan that had thrown Jonesy. Next he stayed on a wiry, shivering chestnut through some of the most vicious bucking Dawson had ever seen, to gentle her in four minutes and gain himself nine points, right there. He then worked out on the rest of the five mounts, was thrown from them all but added another total of six points, giving him fifteen in all. This gave him a six-point lead on the nearest competitor.

Then it was Dawson's turn and the gang surrounding the corral fell into silence as he picked out a rangy gray horse and helped rope and saddle it. There was now none of the good-natured hooting and catcalling and making of bets that went on with the others. This emphasized to Dawson the fact that he had to make a good showing in this contest. If he failed here, he knew that any prospective friends would turn their backs on him.

With the first awkward sunfishing leap, the gray almost tossed him. But then Dawson got a better seat and stayed in the leather and finally gentled the gray in five minutes. On some of the others, though, he didn't do as well as Lester Troy. But that one point advantage on the first horse was enough to give him a tie with Troy on points.

When he was finally finished, there was some mild cheering and a good many of the gang congratulated him on the good showing as he hobbled out of the corral with one ankle painfully twisted and one hip sore enough to throb. At the same time he became aware that there was some argument going on as to which man was the better buster, he or Troy. As the contest wore on and none of the other riders got more than twelve points, this argument waxed hotter. There was discussion of various ways in which the tie could

be broken. Finally, Ishmael Cobb, who had been watching the contest with stoical disdain, said:

"Perhaps the argument can be settled by seeing which rider can stick onto the crazy black horse, the one you've named Big Satan."

A silence fell over the crowd. All eyes turned toward Lester Troy and Dawson. Cobb then added, softly: "Unless, of course, they are afraid." He was looking directly at Dawson as he said that.

Instantly Lester Troy drawled. "Nobody can say I'm yaller. I'll make the try if Dawson will."

Dawson looked toward the big, fiery-eyed black hitched outside the corral. He said: "Nick Risk called it right, I'd say, when he told us no one man was going to gentle that savage by his lonesome. Anyone who tries to fork that critter is playing with the devil. There's a good chance of both of us getting maimed or killed. That wouldn't settle your contest either way. Me, I'm against it, just out o' plain old-fashioned common sense." He let his eyes drift around the group. "And if anyone thinks it's because I lack guts, he can take my place. I'll gladly give him all my points."

No one spoke for a minute, until Lester Troy, screwing up his long, narrow eyes against the afternoon sun, said: "Dawson's got something there. I ain't particularly anxious to tangle with that big black murderer. I said I would only if Dawson was game, too."

"Well, obviously he isn't," Ish Cobb said. He stood there with his arms folded across his great barrel of a chest. The sunlight glinted from his dangling earrings, caught in his slanting eyes. His mobile lips curled in a slight sneer. "I'm sure Hemp Waggoner would be very proud of his friend, this moment. If

that's what he is. Hemp wasn't afraid of man or devil. I'm sure he wouldn't care to call a man friend who was any different."

Dawson realized immediately the big man's craftiness in turning this situation to fit the other one. At the same time he realized that here was a chance for him to even up the score and remove some of the dangerous suspicion that existed against him. He said sharply:

"All right, Cobb. You've called it. I'll ride that big black for a final contest score against Troy on one condition. If I do it and if I win, you'll lay off this deal of treatin' me as though I'm some kind of a spy. I'm not asking you to be my bosom pard, Cobb. All I want is that from now on you drop any insinuat' remarks and treat me the same as the rest of the bunch. Is it a deal?"

Cobb's eyes shot sparks of hate toward Dawson. His mouth thinned, realizing that he'd talked his way into a trap. But when Nick Risk clapped the big man on the back and said, "He's got you there, Isn. Only sportin' thing to do is go along with him," Cobb had no choice but to duck his head in acknowledgment.

Dawson and Troy drew straws to see who would mount the big black first. Troy lost. It took four men to help him saddle up Big Satan. They had to tie an old gunnysack over his eyes, to do it. And Troy insisted, with Dawson's agreement, that for this ride, bucking rolls should be fashioned out of blankets to make seating a bit more secure and that a buckstrap be attached to the saddle fork for the rider to hold on to.

They slipped the hackamore on Big Satan and loosened the lariat and brought the loop over and let it drop. Troy swung up into the saddle. The big black

pawed dirt and rocks and shivered, massively. Then at a signal from Troy, the blindfold was jerked loose. The black tossed his head, skittered to one side in a cakewalk and then reared back on his hind legs. When this did not loosen the hated man-thing on his back, the black brought his front hooves down hard, took two backward steps and then arched straight up into the sunlight in one of the mightiest sunfishing bucks that had been seen all afternoon.

Dawson, watching, held his breath. Sweat broke out in him and chills took him as he saw Troy's seat on the animal slipping. He knew what was going to happen. One of Troy's hands broke away from the buckstrap. When the big black came down, he didn't pause for a fraction of a second, but before Troy could adjust his seat in the saddle, took off in another mighty jolting leap. That one did the trick and as a howl went up from the spectators, Troy was thrown somersaulting sideways from the saddle as his fingers were torn loose from the buckstrap. He landed on his head. He lay there, twisted and unmoving.

Before any of the men could drop a loop over the head of the big black, he'd wheeled, whinnying wildly and rearing back, turned toward Lester Troy. His front hooves came down onto Troy's limp body just as someone dropped a loop over his head. By the time they had Big Satan snubbed a couple of the men had dragged Troy from the corral. His head was a smashed and bloody mess. Dawson didn't have to go over and look at him to see that he was dead.

Mike Scoggins said: "Dawson, you'd be a fool to try and fork that big black killer. Ain't necessary. We'll concede you win the contest. Hell, Troy cain't win it. He's dead. And you're next in line."

Dawson turned toward Ishmael Cobb. He said: "How about it, Cobb? Do you concede, too?"

Cobb clasped his big, jeweled hands in front of him. Then he tugged at a tuft of black hair protruding from his ear. Solemnly he said: "If you are still afraid, yes. You win the contest, but you still have not proved you're a better rider than Troy. Nor as good a one."

With an empty feeling gnawing inside him, Dawson said: "Some o' you hombres snub him and blindfold him again. I'll give him a whirl. Troy stayed on that kicker about half a minute. If I stay over that time, I win and no question about it. Sorry I'm going to have to disappoint you, Cobb. I don't aim to let that big black fantail kill me the way he did Troy."

But as he watched the horse being blindfolded again with the gunnysack, Dawson did not really feel the bravado of his words. He had ridden and been throw many times by other fantails but this horse was different. You could see it in the power of his back and chest and legs, in the wild, daring toss of his head and the crazy glitter in his wild eyes. This was a killer horse and every man here knew it. Dawson knew he'd be lucky not to get unseated at the first buck. But he was committed now. He'd had to do that. It was the only way to gain any headway against the campaign Ish Cobb was working against him.

While the blindfolding was going on, Mike Scoggins and Walleye led the rest of their crowd in making big bets that Dawson would at least outlast Troy and not be killed.

Then Big Satan was ready. Dawson approached him cautiously and then swung up and got set. He jerked his head in signal for the sacking to be removed. For a long instant Big Satan stood quietly trembling as though to adjust his eyes once more

to the bright glitter of the sun. Then he whipped around, joggled his head and left the ground in a tremendous jolting leap that no human could possibly be prepared for. The terrible strain of it pitched Dawson forward and half around so that the saddle horn gouged his side. He fought mightily for balance. Then his head felt as though it would be snapped clean off with the force of the black landing again. But he canted back, with his knees and feet forward. Now, all he could see was the saddle horn and flipping wisps of black mane and the corral fence seeming to fall suddenly beneath him as Big Satan went into a repeat.

That time while he was in the air, the ground and the sky and the men sitting around the corral watching—all went out of focus into a dizzy whirl. Dawson's insides knotted up. The world pitched and spun and jerked all around him. Onlookers fell back away from the fence in a mad scramble as the black sunfished sideways toward it. Afraid of getting his leg smashed if the black pitched into the fence, Dawson swung his right leg half off and up out of the stirrups. His right foot was high on Big Satan's rump when the black did crash into the fence, jarring rails loose, grunting in surprise that he hadn't succeeded in smashing the leg of the man aboard him.

By great luck, at first try, Dawson's foot found the stirrup again as they jounced away from the fence. Then the black arched and leaped again until the saddle was riding precariously on one mere peak of spine. But then when he came down, shivering again, with Dawson's weight still on his back, Big Satan let out a bawling, half-human cry.

From that point on, Dawson knew he had won. Now there was a noticeable weakening rhythm in the

itches and tosses that the black tried for the next few minutes with tiring half-heartedness. Finally he bucked to a dead stop. He raised his head and stood there sweating and quivering and heaving for breath. Dawson waited a wary moment and then whipped him with the end of the hackamore rope. Nothing happened but a jittery, half-hearted hop.

At that a roar of cheering sound rose from the men surrounding the corral. Dawson slid from the saddle. He eased over to a gate post and stripped the tack off. There was a stiff grin frozen onto his sweating face. He found himself blowing almost as hard as the horse. As he left the corral, he was surrounded by Mike Scoggins and Walleye and the rest of the bunch who had bet on him. They couldn't get enough of pumping his hand and slapping him on the back. Even some of the men who had lost, betting against him, crowded around. All of them seemed for the first time to be really openly friendly.

All, that is, except big Ishmael Cobb and Nick Risk. They stood apart from the others. Cobb's ugly face showed no expression but his eyes held Dawson's, their evil stare seeming to go right through him. He turned away then, without a word.

Dawson was a little surprised to notice that Nick Risk didn't come over to congratulate him with the others. Risk just stood there, his handsome face sullen, picking with the fingers of one hand at the expensive silver studs of his gunbelt. His face showed surprise and a certain wariness as he too turned away without a word to Dawson and strode after Cobb. Dawson knew then that Risk was an egotist who couldn't stand to see another man hold the limelight for even a moment. He knew that Risk was jealous of the attention that he had won and that in his

twisted way, Risk might even be beginning to worry about losing his leadership to Dawson. Although he had gained some allies, Dawson knew now that he had also acquired two potent enemies instead of one.

Chapter Three

AFTER WINNING the bronc-busting contest, Dawson was relieved of all camp chores and found himself with loose time on his hands. He took to taking long walks away from the camp proper. Although the cut called Hellions' Hole was only about half a mile wide in places, it ran back deep for nearly five miles before it reached the waterfall gushing out of the East wall. And about a mile past the outlaws' immediate camp, the cut also widened and was thick with shrubbery and stunted trees. It was a wild and rugged section in which a man could stay hidden for days if he was careful.

Several times, coming back from these solitary walks, Dawson found Ish Cobb waiting for his return, watching him with steady-eyed inscrutability. The first time, Cobb said, quietly: "You looking for something back there in the wild part of the Hole, Dawson?"

"Yuh," Dawson said, quickly. "I been looking for that eighty-five thousand in banknotes you and Risk

have cached. Didn't stumble over it yet, though." He laughed easily.

For the first time he saw the big outlaw lieutenant slightly jarred by this unexpected answer. He obviously had expected anything but that. Cobb stood up then and slowly slipped the big fancily carved knife from the scabbard at his belt. He touched the ball of his thumb on the razor-sharp edge of the needle-pointed blade as it glinted in the sunlight.

"I wouldn't look for it again if I was you, Dawson," Cobb said. "If you should happen to find that money, it would be unfortunate. I should have to personally cut your heart out and squeeze the crooked blood out of it with my bare hand."

"Look," Dawson said, a cold feeling going up and down his spine at the sight of the deadly knife, accompanied by the unemotional monotone in which the other man uttered the threat, "if I want to exercise my legs some, that's my privilege. If you ever catch me even making any attempt to dig around and look for any cached loot, it'll be your privilege to use that ugly pig-sticker on me. Or at least try."

Neither man said anything then for a few minutes and finally Cobb turned away, sheathing his knife.

It was three days later that Dawson got the big break he'd been hoping for but hardly expecting that it would happen. He was just about to doze off for an afternoon nap under his lean-to that afternoon when he heard Nick Risk call to Ishmael Cobb. Without raising his head, Dawson saw the two men meet about ten yards away and bring their heads together in a whisper. Twice they glanced toward Dawson, who closed his eyes and feigned sleep, and then the two leaders slipped out of the camp. Dawson waited until they were well out of sight and then he arose

and followed them. His pulses pounded at the idea that perhaps they were going to inspect the place where they'd hidden the stolen money and thus inadvertently reveal it to him.

Dawson removed his boots, even though the rough and rocky ground cut his feet, so as to move more silently. He ran from one clump of shrubbery to the next, from one rock to another, always keeping Risk and Cobb in sight, just ahead of him. About half a mile from the camp, Dawson's heart dropped with disappointment as he saw the two men finally sit down on a ledge of rock. Obviously they had just come out here to talk something over in privacy. They were not going to the cached money.

Working as quietly as possible, then, Dawson took a roundabout way, to make sure of not being discovered, and was able to crawl along on his belly, through thick snake grass to within a few yards of where the other two sat. He was close enough now to make out their words.

"All right then, Ish," Nick Risk said. "We'll plan it definitely for Saturday."

"Yes, I think that will be a good time," Cobb answered. "We'd better check the provisions right now, though, to make sure we're going to have enough."

"Yeah. It's a long haul to Mexico. With the start we'll get at night, before they discover we've pulled out on 'em, if we don't have to stop to get grub, we ought to be able to stay ahead of any pursuit. Ish, you big lunkhead, I've never seen you get excited about anything yet, but wait until you get a look at some of those luscious little Mexican señoritas. Especially when they find out we've got eighty-five thousand dollars American cash between us. You'll have your pick of the land."

"Never mind that," Cobb said sourly. "Let us look at the provisions."

They stood up suddenly and Dawson froze, sprawled there in the thick grass. If they turned his way, he was sunk. He could almost feel that ugly knife of Cobb's sliding into his ribs. He held his breath, lay tense and ready to reach for his .45 and spring erect in case they moved in his direction. But they didn't. They swung off to the right. They stopped by a large, skull-shaped rock and rolled it back, revealing a hole beneath it. Both men then began hauling supplies from the hole, examining them.

After a few minutes, Dawson saw Nick Risk reach into the pocket of his blue, brocaded silk shirt and draw forth some kind of paper. Both he and Cobb studied it for a few minutes before Risk thrust the paper back into his shirtfront again.

Dawson didn't dare wait any longer. He had to leave before they did, to make sure that they didn't discover his boots where he'd taken them off. He slithered backward and out of sight behind a clump of Rocky Mountain cedar before he stood erect again. Then he made his way as fast as possible in his now sore and bleeding feet. He was once again under his lean-to, pretending sleep when the other two returned to the camp. But now Dawson was too excited to sleep. An idea was beginning to form in his mind, how to finally get started on accomplishing his mission. Before he could get the money, he had to know where it was. Now he reckoned he had a way to do that.

That night Dawson got Mike Scoggins and Walleye Thompson to one side. He whispered: "What would you two do if I could prove to you that two nights from now, on Saturday, Risk and Cobb are goin' to

check out of The Hole, solo, with that load of greenbacks? That they're goin' to double-cross the rest of you, cheat you out of your shares?"

"What?" Mike Scoggins roared. Anger inflamed his square cut face. "Why, those lowdown, slimy sons, I'll—"

"Shhhhh! Easy!" Dawson cautioned him. "If they get any idea we know, they'll be on their guard. We've got to catch 'em by surprise."

"What we suppose to do?" Walleye demanded, baring his rotted teeth. "By thunder, we ought to have a showdown with 'em right now. We—" He cut himself short, stared suspiciously at Dawson. "You sure about this, Dawson? How do you know? Can you prove it?"

"Of course," Dawson said. He told them then about the conversation he had overheard that afternoon. Then he said: "What's got to be done is this—tonight, get the information to all the rest of the old bunch who're entitled to a cut of that money. Tomorrow we'll force a showdown with Risk, make him get the money from its hideout and divvy it up between you."

"Wait a minute," Scoggins said. "What's your angle in this? You goin' to try and get a cut of that dinero, too, just for tippin' us off?"

"No," Dawson answered. "I just want to pay them back a little. Cobb has been buzzing around me like a vulture, waiting to pounce the moment I'm off guard. And he's winning Risk over to his thinking. So I'd like to see you men outsmart them. But you hombres aren't going to be able to rush right into this thing without any planning. If you get rough with Dawson and Risk, they're liable to turn the rest of the gang against you. You'll be outnumbered. Don't

think Risk wouldn't do something like that in the face of a rebellion. Lot of the others are pretty loyal to him and frightened stiff of Ish Cobb. This is going to take some right smart figgerin'. If there was some way we could corner all the guns, then the rest couldn't side the leaders. They'd be unarmed and helpless."

Scoggins clenched one fist and pounded it into the open palm of the other. "I think mebbe we could work something like that. Our bunch takes over guard duty at the entrance tomorrow, most of 'em. Very few of the others go armed here in The Hole. Tomorrow morning, before the rest wake up, we'll slip around and pick up all their irons."

"Yeah and tomorrow we won't have Ish Cobb to contend with, either," Walleye put in. "I heard he's takin' a long ride down the Canyon looking in message boxes for any mail that might be comin' to any of us. He'll be gone all day."

"That sounds good," Dawson said. "That'll leave Risk here all alone. You'll be able to handle him a lot easier without Cobb to back him up."

Mike Scoggins and Walleye drifted off to spread the news to the rest of the original Risk bunch. That night Dawson had trouble sleeping. He kept thinking about what was going to happen tomorrow. He grinned grimly to himself in the dark, remembering the old saying about there being no honor among thieves. He decided that that let him out, too, as far as worrying about double-crossing Scoggins, Walleye and the others. Because tomorrow when they forced Risk to dig up the cached money, if Scoggins and Walleye and the rest thought they were going to get hold of it, they had another think coming. He still had no idea how he would get the money away from them. But that would come to him later. First things

had to come first. And getting the stolen bank currency out of its hiding place was the important thing at this time.

Dawson was awakened the next morning by the cursing shouts of the man next to him who had discovered that his guns were missing.

"What dad-blamed no good son of a hoss thief took those two brand-new Colt Lightnings o' mine? If I catch the sneakin' hunk o' coyote bait I'll peel him alive," he howled.

At the same time several of the others were awakened and also set up anguished howls of rage as they, too, discovered their weapons gone. Dawson quickly grabbed his own .45's from under his saddle rigging.

"They missed mine," he said grinning.

Then he saw Scoggins, Walleye and several others of the original gang lined up in front of the sleeping men, all fully dressed. They were all armed and held their guns drawn. Dawson saw Nick Risk sit up on his bedroll and stretch sleepily, listen for a moment to the outraged hollering of the men whose weapons were missing, and then dig for his own guns. He leaped to his feet, started toward Scoggins and the others.

"My irons have been stolen, too!" he shouted. "What's the meaning of this? What's goin' on here? What kind o' connivin' are you hombres up to? Ish! Where the hell is Ish Cobb? Why doesn't he come out here?"

"He ain't goin' to be able to side you none today," Scoggins told Risk. His upper lip was puffed with a wad of snuff, making it hard for him to talk. He spat a brown stream at a scuttling lizard. "He's gone for the day, Nick. Now me and you and the boys are goin' to have a little showdown."

Scoggins looked past Risk at the rest of the men as they arose from their bedrolls. "The rest o' you monkeys line up over there and don't try to interfere in this business—if you want to keep your hides whole. When it's all over, you'll get your irons back."

Risk tried to remain calm. His handsome face tightened and went a little pale but he somehow forced a crooked grin onto his mouth and only a slight tautness in his voice betrayed his real feelings as he said: "What's the beef, boys? Ain't no call to stage an armed mutiny over anything. Put down those guns and I'll be glad to palaver with you about anything you got on your mind."

"Well, sure now, I'll bet you will," Walleye Thompson drawled, sarcastically. "Ain't that real cozy-like? Except that it don't add up, comin' from a hombre who was fixin' to double-cross his own bunch and cheat 'em out of their share o' the loot."

Rage colored Risk's high cheekbones. His fists balled against his thighs. "Who said that? Where'd you get that loco idea?"

Both Thompson and Scoggins flung brief glances toward Dawson. That was all it took. Before either of them could answer, Risk said: "So that's it, eh? This hombre we recently took in is spreadin' lies around. You men know me well enough to know I wouldn't pull a sandy like that on you. You goin' to take my word or this gent's? Begins to look like Big Ish was right and he ain't to be trusted. Only one reason for him to feed you a pack o' lies like that—to get us stirred up against each other, so he can pull some fast move of his own against up. What's the deal, Dawson? Why are you turnin' my own men against me?"

Dawson found all eyes now turning toward him.

Risk had sounded very calm and convincing, and Dawson knew he had to talk fast before Rick gained complete control of the situation. He said: "I don't shoot my mouth off unless I can back it up, Risk. You want me to show the bunch where you and Cobb have a pack of supplies hidden—supplies you stashed away so you won't have to stop for grub when you make your run for it Saturday? Maybe that'll convince 'em."

Dawson had to admire Risk's quick thinking. The gang leader smiled, said easily: "You've been snoop-in' around, following me and Big Ish, it seems. All right, so you saw where we've hidden away some food supplies. That doesn't prove a thing. Just happens Ish and I heard rumors that some of the local ranchers and some of the people from Carthage were planning to besiege us here. We heard their plan was to pin us in the canyon, without food, and that eventually we'd have to give up. Ish and me didn't figger there was much truth to the rumor and we didn't want to booger the rest of you by tellin' you about it. But just to be on the safe side, we thought it might be a good idea to stock up some extra vittles, just in case anything like that did happen."

He sounded so at ease, so convincing, that for a moment Dawson was stunned. He almost had to believe Risk. He thought for a moment, he must have made a mistake. He heard sullen muttering among some of the group with Scoggins and Walleye. He knew that once Risk had convinced them he was innocent, they'd give up this rebellion. Then Nick Risk and Cobb would take care of him in a hurry. At the same time, Dawson's mind went back over the conversation he'd overheard yesterday and he knew he'd

made no mistake. He remembered something else, too.

"That's a mighty good yarn you concocted on the spur of the moment, Nick," Dawson said. He walked toward the other man. "You squeezed out of that tight nicely. But let's see what you can do with this one. Stick up your paws!"

Risk looked at the .45's in Dawson's fists and then at Dawson's level blue gaze. Slowly he raised his hands. Instantly Dawson stepped in and thrust his hand into the other man's shirt front. He snatched out the folded sheet of paper he'd seen Risk thrust there.

Dawson stepped quickly back. He tossed the folded sheet of brown paper to Mike Scoggins. "Take a squint at that, Mike," he ordered. "If I'm not mistaken, you'll find it's some kind of map of the route Risk and Cobb were going to take to Mexico. Maybe that'll convince you I'm tellin' the truth."

Scoggins unfolded the paper and quickly studied it. He handed it to Walleye Thompson, swearing softly. "That's what it is, all right, a map of short cuts along the owlhoot trail Cassidy blazed between here and Mexico. They were plannin' to run out on us, all right. That map really cuts it. You got any way to try and squirm out of that, Risk?"

The tall, dapperly dressed outlaw leader began to look frightened and confused. He nervously finger-combed his thick shock of long yellow hair. He said: "That just shows the route Ish and I worked out for the day when we're all goin' to pull out of here."

He watched the rest of the group cluster around Walleye, looking at the map, while Mike Scoggins and Dawson covered him with their guns. To one side, the other group of owlhoots stood watching,

curiously, helpless to interfere even if they wanted to. And it was obvious that none of them was much inclined to stick his nose into this situation.

Several of the group broke away from Walleye and started toward Risk. "I've seen enough," one of them said. "Even if there was some doubt about Dawson tellin' the truth about what he overheard, I'm gettin' too jittery about that cached cash to let it stay hidden. I say we'd better get it now while the gettin's good. Risk, if you don't willingly agree to go with us and dig up that loot, we're goin' to have to force you to do it. I reckon we won't have too much trouble doing that. Tim Mebane, over there, was once a prisoner of the Apaches. He's probably got a few ideas picked up from them about loosening a man's tongue. How about that, Tim?"

Nick Risk looked toward a one-eyed man whose face was a mass of horribly twisted and crisscrossed scar tissue. Instead of a right hand he had only a ragged looking stump of wrist. The scarred man's deeply set eyes squinched up in a horrible excuse for a grin. That was his only answer.

Nick Risk clearly saw the play was going against him. His eyes roved the men, looking for a friendly face. But there was none.

"No!" he cried. "No! You can't do this. Without me as your leader this gang would fall to pieces. You'd break up and scatter and you'd all wind up stretchin' a rope somewhere. Haven't I kept you all out of trouble a hundred times? You gonna believe this sneakin', connivin' newcomer instead of your own boss?"

"Yuh. Reckon we will, this time," a man called Faro answered. "If Dawson is lyin', you can prove it just by tellin' us where the loot is hidden, Nick. It's

very simple. There's no good reason for you to hold out in the face of this, unless you and Big Ish really *were* plannin' to vamoose with the whole kiboodle."

Risk's tawny eyes darkened shrewdly. "There's more than the money involved now," he said. "Now it's gotten to be a matter of discipline. If I back down now, let you hombres get away with this, I'll have no control over you from now on. The only reason I've been able to keep you in line is because there's never been any question about who's ramroddin' this bunch. Now, there will be. But I've got an idea that should settle things all the way."

No one answered, but some of those who had been starting toward him, paused. They all studied him curiously. Risk went on: "Let me fight this Dawson. I know for a fact that for some scheme of his own, he's framed up this whole deal against me. I ain't askin' you to believe that now. That's not important. But I'll make this deal—I fight Dawson and if he whips me, I'll gladly tell you where the government money is cached and from there on out, Dawson can be your leader. Or you can fight it out among you for someone to take my place. But if I win, you forget this whole loco business. Everything will be the same as it was before."

A young lad, the youngest of the wild bunch, Conway by name, stepped forward, his long yellow hair flying in the wind. "I like to watch a fight as well as the next man," he said. "But I don't see how a fight is going to settle who's right and who's wrong in this." His soft blue eyes circled the men slowly, as if to check who sided him in his opinion.

Hoss Hunnicut spoke up then. "No good, Risk," Hoss Hunnicut said. "You ain't gettin' away with that one. You've already whupped Dawson once, back

there in town. You'll probably do it again. And that sure as hell won't get us our share of the dinero."

"Hold on, Hoss," Mike Scoggins said. "I ain't so sure about that. If Dawson hadn't got a bad break in that scrap I got a hunch he might have rubbed Nick's face in the dirt. Don't underrate this Dawson hombre too much."

An argument immediately began among the men. But most of them were so used to Risk's leadership they automatically followed any line of thought he set forth. A vote was finally taken and the ones who wanted to allow the fight and accept Risk's deal, won out.

Dawson was noncommittal through all of this. In some ways he welcomed the chance. He knew that if he could decisively defeat the present leader, most of these men would automatically look upon him as Risk's successor. That would be a big victory all the way. It would probably set the situation up so that he could get all of the hidden money and somehow finish up the whole job that he was working on. At the same time he wasn't at all sure that he could beat Risk in a fight. At best it would be close. Risk would fight like an animal at bay this time, with his leadership of the gang and his control of the hidden money at stake. Dawson finally decided that he'd go along with whichever way the argument turned out.

As both men stripped to the waist then the band of outlaws formed a huge circle around them, Nick Risk triumphantly said: "You're finished now, Dawson. The night I fought you in town, I was playing it clean. I knew I could outbox you. But today I won't be takin' any chances. I'll use all my tricks. Before I started to fight professionally, back East, I was in

more saloon brawls and tent-show free-for-alls than you ever heard of."

Dawson didn't answer. He didn't know whether this sudden confidence on Risk's part was genuine or if he was just trying to break down Dawson's morale. He didn't doubt, though, that in a dirty fight Risk was plenty experienced. But Dawson, too, had had his share of knock-down-drag-outs. Before settling in Arizona, before he'd been married, he'd lived and worked in the North country and in Canada, where every brawl a man got into was like the kind coming up now.

The two men finally faced each other, standing several yards apart and Mike Scoggins gave the signal for the battle to begin. Immediately those watching began to take sides, shouting encouragement to one contestant or the other. Most of Mike Scoggins' group were for Dawson. Some of the others and nearly all of those who were not in the original Risk gang seemed to be on Risk's side.

The men circled each other warily for a few seconds and then, abruptly Nick Risk lunged in toward Dawson. Trying to spin out of the way of the other's clutching hands, Dawson hooked out hard with his right hand. The blow glanced from the side of Risk's head. Risk caught one hand in Dawson's belt, holding him close. He jammed his right boot down hard on Dawson's instep at the same time, throwing Dawson off balance, holding him helpless. Then he took Dawson completely by surprise by slamming his elbow full into Dawson's face. Dawson heard the sickly crunch of smashed cartilage and blood poured thickly into his throat.

His eyes blurred with tears of rage and pain, he managed to wrench loose before Risk could throw

another blow. He backed off, smearing the mist from his eyes until his vision cleared. By that time Risk was upon him again. Now Risk got his forearm under Dawson's chin and against his throat, and as he pushed forward with his arm he thrust one of his own boots behind Dawson's. Dawson fell awkwardly backward, arms flailing, with Risk on top of him.

They crashed against the ground and Risk pinned him down. He got one knee on Dawson's right arm. He pushed both thumbs into the inside corners of Dawson's eyes and started to gouge. The pressure sent stabs of pain darting through Dawson's head. He knew that in another few seconds Risk would pop his eyes out like grapes, leaving him blind and helpless to be finished off in any way the other man saw fit.

In wild desperation Dawson lunged upward with his legs. He got them around Risk's head in a scissors hold and forced the outlaw leader's hands away. His legs still locked tightly around Risk's head, Dawson threw him sideways to the ground. He tried to scramble over and throw himself on top of Risk. But his eyes were still aching and sore from Risk's gouging attempt, and half-blinded as he was, he could not prevent Risk from squirming free.

Both men then scrambled to their feet. This time when Risk came charging in, Dawson saw him vaguely, a blurred figure lunging toward him. He bent and rushed to meet Risk's charge. His head jolted squarely into Risk's thin waistline, doubling him up. He straightened, then, and caught Risk with a vicious uppercut that lifted him up onto his toes.

Risk immediately fell back, went into a prize fighter's defensive crouch, shaking his head to clear it. Dawson closed in trying to get to Risk while he

was still groggy from the uppercut. But before he could get in another blow, Risk jabbed out with a kick directed at Dawson's kneecap. If it had landed, Dawson would have been instantly crippled. But as the boot lashed out at him, he twisted a little and the kick caught him above the knee. It wasn't a crippling blow, but it knocked him off balance and once more Risk had a temporary advantage.

Risk bored in, now, feinting and weaving cleverly so that Dawson couldn't land a single punch. At the same time he got in close to Dawson and hooked ruggedly into Dawson's solar plexus, knocking the breath out of him and sending sickening stabs of pain all through his midsection. He tried to cover up, then, as Risk, sensing that he had Dawson in bad shape, started a flurry of blows. Several of the round-house punches caught Dawson on the cheekbone and the temple, partially stunning him. He tried to back away, but it suddenly seemed as though a million fists were coming at him from all directions.

In desperation Dawson stopped retreating and lashed out with his own fists. His right hand landed solidly but high on Risk's head. It was the same hand that he'd injured in the previous scrap and once again lances of pain shot up his arm and he knew that hand was finished for the fight. He also suddenly realized that with only one hand left to punch with, he was doomed. Risk was now all over him, throwing knuckles from every angle. The accumulation of blows began to take their toll on Dawson. He felt dizzy and weak. His own arms were getting tired. He knew that he couldn't take much more of this.

But suddenly he got an idea. Although the knuckles of his right hand were badly injured, there was one way he could still use it. He painfully opened his fin-

gers and using the heel of his hand, slammed a solid blow to the point of Risk's chin as the owlhoot leader now carelessly rushed in, convinced he had Dawson licked. Risk's head snapped backward. He stopped dead in his tracks. Dawson moved in and jabbed the outstretched fingers of his other hand into Risk's larynx. As Risk gagged and clutched at his throat, Dawson hooked a hard left to his temple, half spinning Risk around.

Then, as Risk partially recovered from the blow to his Adam's apple, he met Dawson's rush with a solid straight right to the jaw. Dawson was jolted by the blow but he didn't let it stop him. He swung two more punches at Risk. Now, both men realizing that they were tiring fast, with both of them already badly hurt, put their final strength into a desperate all-out attack.

For a long deadly minute as the air was filled with the sickening sound of fist crunching against flesh, Dawson thought that Risk was going to win out. He felt as though his own blows were getting weaker. He didn't know how much longer he'd be able to keep punching. But then, just as Dawson was about to fall back, he noticed that Risk's swings were missing more. He saw that the other man's mouth was gaping like a fish's as he sucked in breath, that his eyes didn't seem to be focusing right.

With this encouragement, Dawson summoned up a last few ounces of reserve strength. He managed to straighten up, set his feet wider apart and throw in rapid succession five more powerful blows. The first one landed high on the side of Risk's head. The second one, a heel-of-the-hand punch, caught Risk alongside the jaw, right at the hinge point. The tall outlaw leader half skittered around and his arms dropped.

Dawson knew then that he had him. He straightened him out with a cuffing side swing and then he threw one straight from the hips at a slight angle. It caught Risk flush on the button. He stood there, teetering, doing a disjointed little shuffling step. A short chopping right was the finisher. Risk's legs went from under him and he sprawled inert in the dirt.

Dawson stood over him, breathing laboriously, smearing blood from his face with the back of his wrist. He was suddenly in an emotional vacuum. He felt nothing. No thrill of victory. He was even hardly aware that the fight was over and that he had won.

The men who had watched, hardened to violence as they were, also stood for a moment in silent tribute to the stunning defeat Dawson had administered to their chief. They moved aside as Dawson finally turned and staggered through their ranks and threw himself headlong onto the first grassy spot he came to. He lay there, sobbing for breath.

Mike Scoggins and one of the others went down to the creek and fetched back a pail of water. They sluiced the whole contents over the head of Nick Risk. But it took another trip to the creek and another dousing from the bucket before he finally stirred slowly and then sat up. His face was a puffy caricature of what it had been. Both eyes were puffed almost shut. His lips were swollen pads from which blood still oozed at the corners. He stared dazedly at Scoggins and the others, hunkered down around him.

"All right, Nick," Scoggins said. "You're through. Dawson walloped the willies out of you. You made a bargain to tell us where the money is cached if you lost. Start talking."

For a moment Risk didn't answer. He tried to but

he couldn't seem to get any words out. Then he spat blood and finally mumbled: "Yuh. I—It doesn't make much difference any more. I'm washed up. I—never took a whippin' like that in my life. The money? Oh—it's hidden in a hollow stump at a turn in the creek about three miles above the camp." And then he fell back, exhausted.

Dimly, Ben Dawson had heard all this but it didn't seem to mean much to him any more. Although he had won the fight with Risk, it had taken a terrible toll. Scoggins, Walleye Thompson and some of the others came over to him.

Scoggins said: "Thanks, Dawson. Both for tipping us off to the double cross Cobb and Risk were planning to pull and for doin' such a good job on Risk. I swear I don't think he'll ever recover."

"I'm beginning to wonder if I will, either," Dawson said, grinning through his smashed lips. "If he feels any worse than I do, I don't know how."

"The boys and I have talked it over," Scoggins said, his blocky red face working with embarrassment. "We've decided you deserve a cut o' that boodle. Not as big as the rest of us get, of course, but still a good-sized chunk. We're fixing to go get it. You want to go along?"

"Yeah," Dawson said. He forced himself stiffly to his feet. Dizziness seized him then and nauseating cramps in the pit of his stomach. He almost fell. When he recovered a little, he said. "On second thought, I don't reckon I can make it." He turned and staggered toward his bedroll and fell onto it in a heap.

A few minutes later one of the sentries at the entrance to The Hole fired a warning shot. Dawson sat up and saw the others looking toward the huge figure of Ishmael Cobb astride a stawberry roan. He heard

Scoggins shout to one of the others: "Here comes Cobb. Get your guns on him right away. No tellin' what that big ape will do when he hears what's happened. And keep him away from Dawson. He'll probably want to kill him for ruining Risk's face like that."

Cobb rode up to the camp, his face layered with dust. His Oriental face was inscrutable but his voice was tinged with wariness as he said: "What has happened here while I was gone? Something is wrong."

"You see," one of the men said. "Just like I always said, that heathen giant has got supernatural powers. Right away he sensed something wrong here."

Mike Scoggins snorted. "He heard the sentry give the warning shot we told him to send off when Cobb returned to camp. He knew that wasn't the usual thing and that something was off. That's all. Well, I don't mind tellin' you that there's been some changes around nere, Cobb."

"What kind of changes? Where's Nick?"

Scoggins turned and looked toward Nick Risk who lay sprawled on his bedroll too sick to move. Cobb straightened in his saddle, his face suddenly clouded with violent anger. He looked awesomely big astride that horse, like some mythical Mongolian war god, with his fierce scraggly black brows drawn together in a frown. "If something has happened to Nick while I was away, somebody is going to pay for it!" He dismounted and started to stride toward Risk when Scoggins stopped him.

"Just a minute," Scoggins said. "You'd better hear what's nappened here before you take a look at Nick."

Cobb halted and wheeled around. He listened as Scoggins quickly told him what had happened. While he was listening, Cobb's eyes raked over the group of men around him, first at the drawn guns they held

and then at the accusing expressions on their faces. Scoggins finished, then added:

"One o' you hombres step up behind him and get his .44's and that pig sticker he carries in his belt."

Cobb whirled around. "You fools!" He spat toward Mike Scoggins' boots. "So you think it's been Nick and I who've pulled a big double deal on you. Let me straighten you out. Let me show you what a pack of stupid dolts you really are. Do any of you have any idea where I've been?"

"Don't try to talk your way out o' this mess with a lot of high and mighty words, Cobb," Scoggins said angrily. "It won't work. You're not in any position to—"

"Shut up!" Cobb cut him off imperiously. "Hear me out." He drew himself up proudly. "I knew from the first day I saw him that this man Dawson was an impostor of some sort. If any of you had the brains of a baboon, you'd have seen that he's not one of us. But he even had Nick fooled. So it was up to me to prove that I was right. The first day he was here I sent a message down to Arizona by way of the hollow tree and hollow rock post office. Today I got back the answer."

"About what?" Scoggins asked.

"This man Dawson." Cobb reached inside his shirt, whipped out a folded piece of notebook paper and flipped it to Scoggins. While he read the note, Cobb turned to the others. "He was a town marshal, all right. But that's the only part of his story that bears any truth. Dawson is *now* a U. S. marshal. When he was assigned to try and recover those stolen Federal notes and bring in our bunch, he hit on this way of working it. He knew we'd already killed a couple of other marshals who've tried to do that job."

"But what about that note from Hemp Waggoner? Even Nick swore that was real."

"It was," Cobb answered. "Hemp did write it; it was in his handwriting. But he was forced to do that, just as he was forced to give Dawson a lot of information about Nick and me. You see, Hemp Waggoner is in a Federal prison in Arizona on a hanging offense. If he helped them put this deal over, he'd be given life imprisonment instead. Naturally he took that choice. Now, Scoggins, what do you think of your pet, Dawson? By the way, where is the impostor?"

Mike Scoggins and the others looked as though they had been struck dumb. They stood with gaping jaws, staring at Ishmael Cobb. They all jumped when Cobb roared: "Answer me, you hyenas! Where is he?"

Scoggins whirled around, pointing to Dawson's bedroll. "He's over there. He was too tired to come with us and—" His voice broke; then, in a shout: "Hell, he's gone!"

"Gone!" Cobb put his huge, ringed hands on his guns. "Then get after him! He can't get out of The Hole and wherever he tries to hide, we'll find him. We'll hunt him down like an animal."

Chapter Four

AS BEN DAWSON had observed Ishmael Cobb's return to camp, listened to the talk between him and the others, the aching soreness in his body was almost instantly forgotten in the face of this unexpected danger. A few minutes before, if anyone had told Dawson that he could get up and around as good as ever, he'd have thought he was out of his mind. But a few minutes after Cobb started to talk, Dawson knew that his whole plan of impersonating an outlaw and joining the infamous Risk gang in order to recover the eighty-five thousand dollars in government currency and arrest as many of the bunch as possible, was boomeranging. He was in a trap now. He'd have to fight his way out or die.

While the others were busy listening to Cobb, Dawson rolled toward a patch of deep grass and then got to his feet and started running toward the corral. About thirty yards from the corral he had to break through an open space. It was while he was crossing this that Cobb and the rest of the gang discovered him. Dawson heard their angry shouts and looked back just as a dozen gun flashes blazed against the late afternoon sun. Dawson ducked and zigzagged as the shots sent their echoes slamming back and

forth between the walls of the cut. The range was too far for accurate sidearm shooting.

Dawson grabbed his tack from a corral pole, after roping the black horse, Big Satan, that he had tamed in the bronc-busting contest. He got him saddled up just as the gang, running after him, broke into a clearing. They were near enough now so that their shots were coming dangerously closer. As Dawson swung up onto Satan, he yanked out one of his own .45's and emptied it at the group of men running toward him. He saw two of them stagger and fall. Instantly the rest threw themselves flat or scurried toward the sides of the clearing for cover. In the temporary lull of gunfire, then, Dawson slapped the quivering black and sent his hightailing out of the corral, toward the east end of the cut.

He forced Big Satan hard, to take advantage of the time he had while the others were saddling their mounts for pursuit. He took a natural trail that ran along the winding creek until he reached the place where Nick Risk had said the money was hidden. He swiftly dismounted in a grove of willows that drooped over the bank of the stream. A covey of sage hens swooped from a thicket as he approached the big, half-rotted tree stump. He reached down deep inside the hollow stump and pulled forth a rusted tin box. He pried the catch open and took a quick look at the thick stacks of crisp new green currency inside and then thrust the box inside his shirt and remounted.

Galloping farther east toward the precipice and lazily falling water that spouted from the middle of it, Dawson felt little satisfaction about having gotten the money, although that was an important part of his assignment. It wasn't going to do him much good unless he could somehow escape from The Hole. He

realized now how terribly right the chief had been in trying to talk him out of taking on this suicidal assignment. But he'd had to do it. When he'd heard that the Risk bunch had killed his friend, Dan Hollenbeck, the Express guard on the train they'd robbed, Dawson had vowed that he'd get Risk and as many of his bunch as possible. And although Dawson's office was in complete accord with this, he'd been told that his first duty was to try to recover the money. Well, he had the money now but it was going to take a long, strong streak of luck to enable him to get it back to civilization.

Dawson wondered if he'd ever see his daughter, Laurie, again, back on the Arizona ranch where she was staying with friends. He remembered how proud she'd been the day he'd first pinned on the badge of a U. S. marshal, after they'd left the town of Piney Flats, following the burning-out of his ranch there. He remembered the way she'd looked up at him, her round blue eyes shining adoringly as she said: "After you've been on the job a few months, Pops, there won't be a gang of owlhoots left, west of the Big Muddy. The ones you don't round up will all be scared back East." She was too young to realize the deadly danger of his job. All she saw was the glamor and heroism. Dawson hadn't disillusioned her. But he'd made sure that if anything happened to him, she'd be provided for until she was old enough to take care of herself.

He forced himself to stop thinking about that now, though. He had to plan how to get out of this tight. Every once in a while the wind from behind him bore sounds of pursuit, angry cries and the pounding of hoofbeats. He was already only about a mile from the closed-in east end of the cut. There wasn't much

sense in riding any farther. He glanced at the towering sidewalls of The Hole and knew that there was no escape that way. His only chance might be to stop here and try to double-back around the pursuing bunch. If he could succeed in doing that, there was some slight chance he could shoot or trick his way past the sentries at the entrance to The Hole. He remembered how the first day he had arrived here, he'd realized that the hideout could also be a trap for a fugitive from the gang itself. It had all too soon turned out to be that for him.

A moment later he dismounted from the big black, slapped his rump and sent him on up the creekside trail toward the east end of the cut. On foot, Dawson then cut to the south and circled around back toward the west, the way he had come. He stopped once near the base of a peculiar and easily remembered rock formation and buried the box of bank notes in that new place. It was too cumbersome to lug around with him. And this way, even if the Risk gang killed him, at least they wouldn't have the pleasure of recovering that money.

Doubling back and around his own trail, Dawson spotted a ledge about a hundred feet up one of the side cliffs. There was a series of rock outcroppings which would permit easy climbing to that ledge. He knew that from up there he'd have a good view of most of the cut. He thought he'd better get up there and get a line on the position of his pursuers. It took him only a few minutes to reach the ledge. He lay flat upon it, in the shadows of the early evening, and swept his searching gaze up and down the length of The Hole. He drew in a sharp breath of surprise and dismay.

The Risk bunch hadn't taken off after him in a full

pack. They'd been too smart for that. They'd scattered and spread out across the width of The Hole and were working along it, slowly, methodically, the men about fifty yards apart, searching out every possible hiding place. It would take them some time to do it, to work all the way back to the east wall, but eventually they'd flush him out. He thought about trying to slip through or fight his way through the spread-out line of men but almost instantly abandoned that idea. It was foolhardy. He'd never make it.

Right now the gang was about a mile behind the ledge where he lay sprawled face down watching them. He figured roughly that they'd be able to move about a mile an hour. It would take them about three more hours to finally pin him up at the east end. By that time it would be dark. He would have a better chance of slipping through the line then. In the meantime, he'd just retreat before them.

He climbed down from the ledge and made his way slowly along the cut, keeping what he figured to be about a mile between himself and the others all the time. Just as the last rays of the setting sun filtered through the west end of The Hole, Dawson had reached the east wall. He saw that there were rock outcroppings spaced closely enough together to enable him to climb up to a ledge that ran along the edge of the waterfall, halfway up the precipice. He climbed up there just as darkness fell like a smothering cloak over the canyon.

A few minutes later, below him, Dawson saw, one after another, torches begin to flare alight. In less than half an hour the eerie reddish glow of those flaming pine-knot torches lighted up the cut for its entire width and a quarter of a mile in front and behind

the slowly advancing line of men. Dawson's heart sank and sweat broke out over his tired, aching body. His last hope, that of being able to sneak through the line under cover of darkness, was now destroyed.

Up on the ledge where he lay, the precipice caught and cornered echoes, weirdly, so that snatches of shouted words from the men below were carried up to him. He heard someone holler:

"Another mile or so and we'll have him pinned against the precipice. We'll have him then."

A second echoing voice answered: "Remember not to shoot to kill, if you can help it. We've got to find out where the spyin' law-bustard reburied that loot."

Dawson lay still, trying to figure his best move. There didn't seem to be any out. His only hope was to stay up here and pray that he wouldn't be discovered before some of the searchers grew exhausted and bedded down for the night. Half of them would probably still stand guard over campfires to try and prevent him from sneaking through their line, but that way at least he would have a better chance. The men would have to scatter more widely apart. There might be shadowy spots that he could slip through.

As the next hour wore on, though, the gang moved faster. At the end of that hour they were right at the foot of the precipice. Dawson could hear their voices quite plainly now. He lay flat, hugging the inner corner of the ledge upon which he was sprawled, out of sight of the men below. He could tell by their talk that they were puzzled as to his whereabouts, that they were scanning the face of the cliff, looking for him. He heard some argument about whether or not he had already slipped through the line and might be heading back toward the west end. He had hopes that some of the bunch might

start back that way to try and catch him. That would at least lessen the odds against him. But the hope was short-lived.

He heard Nick Risk's voice say. "See that ledge up there, yonder, to the right of the Falls? If a man was lying up there, hugging the inside of the ledge, we couldn't see him. Some of you climb up there and take a look. I know he's hiding somewhere and didn't slip through us."

Mike Scoggins answered: "If you're right, it would be suicide for anyone to go up there after him. He'd hear us coming, know he was trapped and start shooting. He'd be able to pick off anyone climbing up after him. I, for one, ain't risking my neck going up after him. If he's there—or wherever he is—let's just wait him out. He can't stay hidden forever. When he gets hungry or thirsty enough, he'll make a break."

Then Dawson heard Ishmael Cobb's deep, throaty voice: "Scoggins is right, Nick. I have a better idea. If we shoot at the rocks above that ledge, we'll start some of it falling on him. That'll root him out."

There was further argument about that, and Dawson lay there stiffly, completely sweat-soaked now, feeling like a treed animal at bay above a pack of hounds. Then there was the flat, echoing crack of a rifle. Ten feet above the ledge the bullet struck and ricocheted off the rock in a shrill scream. A few seconds later a dozen other shots were fired. Their echoes blended into a solid wave of sound. Above Dawson pieces of rock began to chip off and rain down upon him. He covered his head with his hands, cold and trembling with fear now.

For half a minute they poured slugs into the rock formation above the ledge. Gradually larger chunks of rock were breaking off. A piece clunked to the

ledge, just missing Dawson's head, that was as big as a watermelon. He heard the impact as it struck the ledge and he shuddered. He couldn't take this any longer. At any moment a small slide might start above him.

As a shower of jagged rock pieces thundered down a few feet away from him. Dawson desperately pushed to his feet, stood leaning against the side of the ledge. He pulled out one of his .45's and aiming into the men on the floor of the cut far below him, began shooting. Abruptly the firing from below ceased, and the men scattered to look for cover behind rocks and clumps of greasewood. Dawson figured maybe he'd made a lucky strike or two.

During this brief respite, Dawson inched along the ledge toward the Falls roaring out from the center of the precipice a few yards away. Thick spray, like a fog, spewed from the side of the falls where it gushed out of the hole in the rocks. Dawson figured if he could live to reach that, it would give him cover from the guns of the men below him.

As he edged along, though, the Risk bunch started firing at him. This time their shots were spaced. They were taking careful aim. Dawson knew that he made a fairly good target, silhouetted up there by the flickering torch lights. As if to prove that, the next shot, instead of ricocheting from the rocks around him, lanced into his shoulder. It sent shocks of pain all down that side and the front of his shirt began to redden with blood. Dizziness swept over him. Several times he almost swayed over the edge of the ledge, but at the last moment he recovered his balance.

Several more shots slammed into the rock in front of him and above him. But now the outer reaches of spray were splashing over him. He lunged the final

few steps and sprawled on his face as the spray spumed around him in thick clouds. He could hear nothing now but the thundering roar of the falls. He lay there, gasping for breath and fighting against unconsciousness from the wound in his shoulder. The icy underground water soaked him and chilled him, but it also helped to revive him.

Safe now from being shot from below, Dawson raised his head. The light from the torches penetrated the clouds of spray, turned them into rainbow hues. It also showed him that the solid body of water that was the Falls proper, shot out from the underground river that fed them, about ten yards from the lip of the rock. He also saw that the ledge upon which he was sitting extended down below the Falls where it was comparatively dry. There he'd be shielded completely from the gang below by the solid body of water that was the Falls.

He got to his feet and slowly worked his way along the slippery ledge, trying not to think about what would happen if he should slip and fall, slowly spinning through the air, hundreds of feet to the sharp rocks far below. When he finally reached the place under the great silvery bulk of water that was the outward hurtling falls, Dawson was amazed to find that the ledge ended at a dark aperture in the otherwise solid rock. It was some kind of cave entrance about ten feet around.

Gingerly edging along, Dawson moved cautiously into this black hole in the rock. Inside it was as dark as the bottom of a well. It stank from mould and dampness. As Dawson crawled farther into it, he felt lizards scuttle over his hands and legs. Once again hope began to stir in him as he became aware that the cave seemed to run into a narrow, upward-slant-

ing tunnel. He dragged himself slowly along this tunnel, the upward slant of it becoming steeper all the time. His ears ached from the deafening roar of the Falls that was caught in the tunnel as though in a sound box.

But he kept slowly, painfully moving forward. It was his only chance. He couldn't have remained hidden under the Falls forever. Eventually he'd have had to emerge and the Risk bunch would have still been down there, waiting for him to do that. If this tunnel broke out into the open somewhere, he would be safe. The Risk gang would wait for a few days for him to emerge and then would decide that he'd been caught under the Falls and washed down to death upon the rocks.

After a while the tunnel began to wind and Dawson lost all sense of direction. He'd stuffed a chunk of shirt against the wound, but nevertheless he grew stiffer, weaker, with each hour. Several times he felt as though he must stop and rest but instinct told him that once he did, he'd be lost, he'd be finished. There was only one thing to do. He had to keep going. In places the tunnel leveled off a little, stopped its upward slant, and Dawson crawled over small mounds of sand. The rocks he touched were smooth and round and he figured that at some time in long years past, this tunnel had been a small underground stream, perhaps a branch of the big one that fed the Falls.

Time lost all meaning eventually and Dawson could hardly hold himself up on his hands and knees. He now inched along slowly. When it seemed that there wasn't another ounce of strength left in him to move, he looked up ahead and saw two tiny flickering points of light. At first he thought it was his imagination,

but after shaking his head and rubbing his tired eyes, the lights stayed there. He knew then that they were stars and that the end of the tunnel was within reach and that it broke out into the open air somewhere.

This gave him new strength and he pulled his way along toward those two distantly shining points of light. The air became less damp and was filled with the fresh scent of sagebrush. He drew it in in great gulps. He kept saying prayers of thanks, repeating them over and over, numbly, hardly knowing what he was saying. And then at last he crawled out and through a thick bunch of hawthorne and wild gooseberry, the tangled masses of which obscured the narrow opening of the tunnel at this end so that if you didn't know it was there, you would miss it completely.

Dawson sprawled on his back, resting now and looking up at the star-thick sky. Slowly some strength oozed back into him as the fresh night air revived him. After a while he got weakly to his feet and studied the stars to reorient his sense of direction. While doing this he noticed a faint glow of light about half a mile west of where he stood on the great mesa atop the Red Wall. He decided that the glow probably came from the torches of the Risk gang and that was the direction of Hellions' Hole. He started slowly toward it.

Soon he picked up the sound of the waterfall and the torch-glow became brighter. He reached the edge of the cut and peered over. Hundreds of feet below him, the Risk gang moved about like ants in the flickering flare of their torches. Dawson grinned grimly, thinking of how long they would wait there in vain. But then a spasm of pain from his shoulder twisted the grin from his face. He had to get moving. Without

a horse it was a long, long trek to the nearest habitation. He started out for the edge of the Red Wall, to the south of the entrance to Hellion's Hole. It was nearly morning when he reached it.

It was noon before he found a place where he could clamber safely down to the floor of the Canyon. All that day he walked over the trail that twisted through the Hole-In-The-Wall section, stopping only to shoot a sage hen and eat it raw, tearing it apart with his bare hands. Toward the end of the day he was staggering, but he was out of the hills by then, moving into the rolling ground at the edge of the Big Horn basin. He remembered that on the trek out here a couple of weeks ago they had passed a nester's place only a few miles from where he was now. Dawson wondered, though, if he would be able to make those last few miles.

He stumbled on, so weak now that there was a continual roaring in his ears. Several times he fell. The last time he wasn't able to get up. He began to crawl then. But the roaring in his head grew louder. The rolling ground around him and the dark night sky above began slowly to revolve. And then it spun faster and faster. The roaring in Dawson's head seemed to explode in a great white flash of light. Then a tremendous and overwhelmingly heavy darkness descended upon him and smothered him, sickeningly. . . .

Chapter Five

HE WAS floating lazily, loosely, on a soft cloud. He felt sleepy and relaxed. It seemed to him vaguely that he ought to try to stir, to get up and stop this ridiculous floating through space because there was something he had to do, something very important. But somehow he couldn't seem to get very worked up about it. Every thing was much easier, much more pleasant this way. Then, too, there were the three angels hovering over him, stroking his forehead with their cool hands. They all looked alike. They were all softly smiling, with round, fresh and pretty faces, with their wheat-gold hair drawn tightly back from the forehead and coiled in braids at the back of their proud heads.

Then suddenly everything exploded in a sharp blast of pain that seemed to run all through Ben Dawson's fever-wracked body. He lurched into a sitting position from the force of the pain, a cry breaking from his dry throat. He saw then in a flashing instant of crystal clear, pain-sharpened reality, that the cloud he was floating on was an old-fashioned, homemade bed. The three angels blurred into one. The halo-like haze around her head vanished and she became what she really was, a pleasantly good-looking young woman in her late twenties. With one hand she was stroking

his forehead. With the other she was gently trying to force him back to a prone position.

Dawson was vaguely aware that he was naked to the waist and was mildly embarrassed about that. He was also aware of the crude white cloth padding and bandage hanging loosely from a scabbed and ugly-looking wound high on his left breast, near the shoulder.

"Please," the woman pleaded in a soft voice. "Please lie down again. I—I'll try not to hurt you again, but I had to change that dressing. Try to be quiet. You'll rest better after that."

He let himself be forced back again, mostly because he was too weak to resist. He watched the young woman's face while her hands quickly and expertly finished adjusting and fastening the wound dressing. Her eyes were the same shaded blue as the sky after a summer shower. They were set widely apart and the lashes were startlingly dark in contrast to her general fairness. Her nose was small and a little snubbed but her mouth was full, with a humorous quirk to the lip corners. It was not a beautiful face by popular standards, but it held both gentleness and strength and was good to look at because of an inner beauty that shone through it. Dawson watched the different expressions that floated across it as she worked, and he was fascinated by the mobile attractiveness of her face.

At the same time he became more and more aware of his own weakness and the fever that gripped him. Hot flashes alternated with sudden chills that left him panting. The things that had happened to him shot through his mind in jumbled chaos. He could not seem to remember anything too clearly. He couldn't seem to separate reality from feverish hal-

lucinations. But one thing kept pressing to the front of his thoughts. He voiced it, finally:

"I—I've got to leave here," he said, weakly. "I've got something to do. I can't just lie around. I—I'm all right now. I think I can get up now."

"Hush!" She ordered. Her eyes met his for a moment and then moved away again. "You're weak as a new born kitten and still burning with fever. But I think it's getting ready to break. You'll have to be quiet, though. Please be quiet and don't make all the work I've done on you the past few days be for nothing."

"Few days? You mean I've been here that long? Where is this place? Who are you? How did I get here?"

She finished with the dressing and stood up. She folded her arms across the proud strain of her breasts under a polka-dotted calico dress. She told him: "I found you three days ago, out on the range, just past the east border of our property. You were unconscious. At first I thought you were dead. But there was still a spark of life in you and you were fighting so hard to keep it, I had to help you. This is the homestead of Ned Parsons and I'm Callie Parsons, his daughter. You'll be all right here—until you get well, anyhow. And that's all you need to know for now. Try to get some sleep and let the fever break."

"How long will it be before I'm able to get up and around again?"

"I'm not sure. Perhaps a few days. Maybe a week. Don't ask any more questions now." Her voice grew stern and her lips tightened and Dawson knew it wouldn't do any good to try to learn more at this point.

She turned and started out of the room. Dawson

watched her walk away and then he became aware of a man standing in the doorway. The man was of medium height, with wide, bony shoulders under a patched cotton workshirt. His angular face was stained a walnut color by the sun. His hair was long and thinned to near baldness on top. A long, drooping mustache decorated his thin lips. His eyes, bright and penetrating, were sunk cavernously in their sockets. His face was lined heavily at the nose and mouth and eye-corners. You didn't have to look at him twice to know that here was a hard-working nester, a good one. As an old cattleman, Dawson didn't think too highly of any of them, but the ones who worked hard and kept up their place and had the guts to make something out of it, earned his grudging admiration. This man was obviously in that group.

But the eyes of Ned Parsons were cold and hard as they met Dawson's. His face was as set as though made of granite. He said to his daughter: "Still wasting your time, saving his miserable owlhoot life just so they can hang him in Carthage?"

"Papa, don't," she whispered. "He'll hear you."

"Hope he does." His eyes never left Dawson's. "Or are you nursing him back so he can show his appreciation by robbing us and maybe shooting us in the back?"

"Please," she begged. "Leave him alone right now. He's too weak to hurt anybody right now. Let him be until he's recovered a little and then I'll let you settle with him. You can do what you want, what you think best, then."

He said: "Ah! You'd have done better to have left him out there to become buzzard bait. You're as foolish soft-hearted as your mother used to be."

Before Dawson could work up his strength to say

something, the woman took her father by the arm and led him away. Dawson tried to think about what the man had said, but his thinking was getting more and more befuddled as the fever swept through him once again.

Through the minutes or hours or days that followed—Dawson didn't know which because time became all massed together—there were moments of bright, clear wakefulness and there were times of terrible pain and tossing and horrible nightmares. There were moments of torturing, unendurable thirst. There was the sweet wonderfulness of cool water trickling past his lips and into his throat, of cool hands on his sweating forehead and temples. And then that was all over and there was only the fuzzy weakness.

Callie Parsons brought him hot homemade broth and warm, sweet bread. He gulped it ravenously. Then there were beef and garden vegetables. He felt the strength flowing back into him. Through all that time he couldn't seem to get Callie to talk much, though. She acted strangely. He'd catch her eyes upon him, but then they would turn quickly away. Once, when he thanked her for all she had done for him and complimented her on how pretty she was, Callie blushed furiously and snapped:

"I've only done what any Christian person would do. I wouldn't let a wounded pack-rat lay out and die if I could do anything for it. And I don't need any compliments from the likes of you, thank you." Then she turned and flounced quickly out of the room before Dawson could answer.

It was a few days later, the first time he was able to get out of bed and get dressed, that Dawson realized exactly what the situation was. He heard Callie

and her father, out in the big main front room of the farmhouse, arguing. The old man was saying:

"And I say he is well enough to leave. You've had your fling at playing the good Samaritan and it's over. I'm not harboring any dirty owlhoot from that Risk bunch any longer than I have to. He goes today."

Hearing that, the whole thing was suddenly clear to Dawson. He called out: "Mr. Parsons, can you step in here a minute?"

The old man came into the doorway, his deep-set eyes hard and bright. The red of anger and embarrassment stained his high cheekbones through their deep tan. "I reckon you heard what I said," he told Dawson. "It don't matter. I'll tell you the same thing to your face. I—"

"Hold on a minute," Dawson stopped him. "Did it ever occur to you that you might be wrong about me?"

"No, it didn't. Several weeks ago, on a Saturday night in Carthage, I saw you with the Risk bunch. I never forget a face, even if that shock of prematurely white hair wouldn't tag you anywhere. It's you, all right."

"That's right," Dawson said. "You made no mistake. That was me." He saw Callie move up behind her father, listening. "And I was a member of the gang for a while. At least I pretended to be. It's rather a long story but you might as well hear it right now. I owe you folks a lot and I don't want you thinking the worst about me."

Dawson then proceeded to tell them both the whole story. While he talked, he watched the expression on their faces. First there was incredulity and then relief. And the more he told them, the more Callie's face lighted until it was radiantly lovely.

When he finished, old Ned Parsons said: "Well, I'll be dad-blamed if that ain't the beatenest tale I've ever heard. And hard to believe as it is, still there was a ring of truth in your voice when you told it. You can prove all that, I suppose?"

Dawson paused before answering. He took a deep breath. "No," he said. "I can't. That was one of the things that made this assignment so dangerous. I was completely on my own. If I'd had any credentials on me there was always a chance of the Risk bunch finding them, no matter how carefully I'd hidden 'em. That would have been fatal."

The old man's face hardened again, his eyes dark with suspicion. "Surely you don't expect me to swallow a fanciful tale like that with no proof whatever?"

"Why else would I be here? Why would I leave the refuge of Hellion's Hole unless that was true?"

Ned Parsons shrugged his big, bony shoulders. "There's lots of times when thieves fall out. Maybe you got in bad with the bunch for some reason and had to leave. Mebbe got into an argument with Risk or that big heathen lieutenant of his. There could be lots of reasons."

Callie Parsons grabbed her father by the arm. "Oh, no, Papa," she said. "I—I'm sure Ben is tellin' the truth. I—I knew, somehow, from the very first moment I saw him, that he wasn't one of them. Can't you see, can't you tell, just by lookin' at him?"

"No, I can't," the old man said. He took his daughter's hand from his arm. "And he's 'Ben' to you, already, is he? Now I know he's been here too damned long." He turned back to Dawson. "Get ready to leave, pronto. I'll drive you into Carthage, if that's where you want to go."

"Just a minute," Dawson said. "There is one way I

might be able to prove who I am, in Carthage. The lawman there has a list of all U. S. marshals, their descriptions and badge numbers. If—when we go into town—I look him up and we find my name on the list and my description tallies and I can give my badge number, will that convince you?”

Ned Parsons hesitated. “Well,” he drawled. “Something like that might be proof enough.”

“But I don’t want to leave today,” Dawson said. “When I go into Carthage again, I want to be well enough to organize a posse and go back to the Hole after that gang. I’m not quite up to that yet, though. If I go into the town before I’m ready, if I have to hang around there for several days, some word might get back to the gang. Only by surprise will we have a chance of rounding the bunch up. If they accidentally learn I’m not dead, they’ll figure that there’s some secret exit and entrance from the Hole and once they learn that, they’ll no longer feel safe. They’ll break out and scatter.”

The old man thought about that. Then his eyes fixed on Dawson’s long and steadily. Finally, he said: “I’m probably the world’s biggest damned fool, but I’ll go along with you.” He wheeled around, then, and left the room.

When he’d gone, Callie said softly, without looking up at Dawson: “He’s not really as harsh as he sounds. I think he believes you just as much as I do. But he’s been fooled by so many people and he’s had things so hard all his life, he just can’t help bein’ a mite bitter.”

“It’s all right,” Dawson told her. “Neither of you has to apologize to me about anything—ever. Few folks would have taken the trouble to nurse and house a half-dead stranger. Especially if they suspected he

was one of the Risk bunch. How long have you and your father been homesteading out here?"

"About four years," she said. "He's been fairly happy here. It's been hard, but not like it's been with some other things he tackled. He's tried a lot of things ever since we came from the East, when I was a little girl. One thing I'll give him—he's never let failure or hard luck get him down."

"I'll bet he hasn't," Dawson said. "You can tell that by lookin' at him."

Both Dawson and Callie Parsons then fell easily into a session of reminiscence and revelation about themselves in the way that new and close friends always do. She told him how at first her father had gone into the cattle business up North and had just been about to succeed in a small way when the terrible winter of '86 wiped out all his cattle and took away his wife, Callie's mother, with pneumonia.

"After that," Callie said, sighing, "we moved to Sheridan. It was a frightening place, I remember. Even though I was fifteen then, I could never get used to the violence around us. The homesteaders and the cattlemen there were fighting openly then. The big cattlemen used to come into town surrounded with riders, all armed. Even in town there was shooting. I was always afraid Papa was going to get killed and I'd be left all alone."

"What did he do in Sheridan?" Dawson asked. "Did he go into business there?"

"Yes. He opened a general store. He was doing well, too, and getting out of debt, until one night a dishonest clerk he'd fired sneaked back and robbed the safe of a month's receipts and then burned down the place. It was after that he decided to try and

make a living out of the land. He got the grant here and we made the long trip across the Big Horns."

Callie laughed, suddenly, remembering something. "The thing that scared me most about Sheridan, though," she recalled, "was the talk about Indians that was always going on. I used to have nightmares about being scalped and captured. Actually there was never any trouble with them while we were there, but there was always fear."

"I thought most of the main tribes were confined to their reservations around that time?"

"They were. But small hunting parties were always loose in the mountains and then Sheridan was so close to the Crow reservation in Montana that the town was always worrying about an attack. I remember one fall night in 1887, a man who was drunk set fire to a haystack to keep himself warm in Dayton. That was about twenty miles southwest of Sheridan. A group of riders on the way to Sheridan saw the glow of the flames and figured the Crows were attacking and destroying Dayton.

"An alarm spread like wildfire and ranchers and their families all raced into Sheridan from the surrounding country. All the main public buildings in town were barricaded. I'll never forget that night. Nobody got a wink of sleep. I lay shivering with my head under the blankets all night long. I thought it would never get to be morning. All night long everybody, lots of the ranch and farm families still in their night clothes, waited for the war cry of the Crow. Then just about dawn scouts were sent to Dayton and they returned with the report that no massacre had occurred there. But the fear was almost as bad as if it had actually happened. Everybody was just as exhausted."

When Callie Parsons had told Dawson about most of her life, he told her about his daughter, Laurie, and how his wife had died and the fun and trials and tribulations of a man trying to raise a daughter without a woman's help.

"Every girl should have a mother," Callie said. "I know how that is. It still isn't too late for you to get married again. You're still a young and very attractive man. I—I mean . . ." She broke off, stammering and blushing, and suddenly turned from Dawson and left the room under some flimsy pretext.

During the next few days, as Dawson, now recuperated, helped Callie and her father with some of the farm chores, he thought a lot about that remark of hers. He found himself constantly looking at her. For the first time since his wife had died, Dawson felt the deep stirrings of a man's need for a woman's companionship, a woman who would always side a man through the bad times and the good, who could help him bring up Laurie right and proper and perhaps give him the son he'd always wanted.

But when he found Callie's attraction getting too strong, Dawson would force himself to face facts. Even if he did seriously consider remarrying, it couldn't be until after this assignment with the government to get the Risk gang was completed. It wouldn't be fair to Callie until that was done. Because the odds against his accomplishing this mission alive were still mightily stacked against him.

When the time came for Ned Parsons to drive him into Carthage, he knew that Callie Parsons was just as strongly attracted to him, too. She could hardly say good-bye; her voice was tight and almost breaking, and just before she turned and hurried back to the house, Dawson saw tears film her eyes.

A lump came to his throat, then. He told himself that after this was all over, this Risk business, that he'd come back here and visit with the Parsons for a while again. If he and Callie still seemed to feel the same way about each other, maybe they could talk over his resigning from Government service and starting up a spread of their own somewhere here in the basin. At the same time, some vague intuition told Dawson that this was but the makings of a dream. It could never really be. Not for a man who had dedicated himself to a one-man war against the gun-slamming parasites who had made this rugged country their own private stomping grounds.

On the long ride into town, Dawson and Ned Parsons talked little. Parsons sat ramrod-stiff on the seat of the buckboard. With his clean white Sunday-Go-To-Meetin' shirt buttoned at the neck, almost choking him, he looked like a country preacher. Dawson thought that Parsons had probably forgotten Dawson's promise to prove his identity in town, or that the nester had by this time fully gotten over his suspicions. But that was not so.

As they drove down the main street of Carthage, the old homesteader said in a stiff, uncomfortable voice: "Kind o' like to drop in the Sheriff's office with you to check those records, if you don't mind."

Dawson's voice was untroubled. "Not at all. Glad to have you."

As they moved along the main street, though, Dawson became a little uneasy at the occasional hate-filled glances thrown his way. It was obvious that some of the townsfolk remembered that he had ridden off as a member of the infamous Risk bunch.

Ned Parsons saw this, too. He said: "You don't know how much the Carthage people hate that gang."

And the folks from nearby ranches and homesteads. Nearly all of them have been raided by the gang for food or beef at one time or another. And some o' their womenfolks was molested. The Risk boys aren't like ol' Butch Cassidy's wild bunch and some o' them other owlhoot bands. They never paid for the liquor they drank or the damage they did like most owlhoot bands do when they take over a town. It's going to be a good thing you can prove who you really are. Word is going to spread around that one of the Risk boys is in town by his lonesome. If you wasn't able to prove you aren't really one of them, these folks would make trouble for you. For me, too, for ridin' you in like you was a friend."

"Well, we won't have to worry about that long," Dawson said. "The sheriff'll be around somewhere, won't he?"

Parsons snorted. "Yup. Only time he finds business outside of town is when the Risk gang are due. You can't find the sheriff nowheres then. But he'll be around now."

The jailhouse was a small frame building, wedged in between the livery stable and the Express office. Dawson and Ned Parsons went inside. A man sprawled his beefy bulk in a swivel chair behind a paper-littered flat-top desk. He had the big, round, slightly hunched shoulders of the fat man who is not really fat but is solid and powerful under his outer layer of lard. He wore a soiled and spotted pink shirt, a shoestring tie and a vest with a polished tin star on it. The backs of his chubby, strong-looking hands were matted with black hair. His moon face at first glance looked bland and good-natured. But his shrewd little green eyes and small, tightly controlled mouth belied this. He had short, bushy black brows

and a close cropped brush of black hair over his low, broad forehead.

"Evenin'," he said in a voice surprisingly high-pitched. "What's on your mind, Parsons?" Although he addressed Ned Parsons, the sheriff's shrewd gaze stayed on Dawson.

"Friend o' mine here has got some business to talk with you, Lonergan," Ned Parsons said. "Ben Dawson—Ed Lonergan, Carthage's lawman."

Lonergan's bushy black brows drew together in a frown. He pulled a greenish brown cheroot from his vest pocket, stuck it into his tight little mouth and lit it, all the time not taking his eyes off Dawson. Through a cloud of choking smoke, he said: Looks familiar to me, somehow. I seen you before somewhere, Dawson?"

"Yes," Ned Parsons said. "You might have, if you'd been in town a few weeks back, the last trip the Risk bunch made here. Dawson was with 'em that night. But I don't ever remember you bein' around when they hit town, Lonergan."

The sheriff swung his feet to the floor, brought the swivel chair forward with a squeaking of its springs. "I resent that, Parsons. You inferrin' I run out when that owlhoot bunch comes in? So happens I was here that Sunday mornin' when the bunch pulled out o' town. And I remember now, that was where I saw Dawson last."

Ned Parsons said: "Why didn't you do something about the Risk bunch, then?"

Lonergan shrugged. "What could I do? There wasn't any complaints against 'em. When I come in I see a band o' men ridin' out of town, peaceful-like. What would you expect me to—"

"People in Carthage stopped complaining about

that bunch long ago," Parsons cut him off. "It never did 'em any good because the law was always conveniently out of reach until after the bunch had been and gone. But that's neither here nor there. Ben Dawson's got something to tell you. Tell 'em your story, Ben."

Lonergan's little green eyes never left Dawson's face as Dawson quickly related all that had happened. When he'd finished, Ned Parsons broke in: "So naturally, now, Ben wants you to confirm his story. Then he wants you to help him organize a posse and catch the Risk gang by surprise—through that secret entrance."

"As an inducement to get help," Dawson said, "there's a standing reward of ten thousand dollars on Nick Risk alone. No tellin' how much there might be all told, with most of his gang wanted somewhere or other."

"I see," Lonergan said, nodding his round head sagely, his small mouth screwed up at one corner. "If your name and badge number are on that last list—like you say—that'll solidly confirm your yarn, won't it, Dawson?"

Dawson nodded and watched the fat lawman reach into a side drawer of the desk. But instead of a list, he brought forth a .44 Frontier Colt six-shooter. He aimed it at Dawson's belly. Quietly, he said: "Raise 'em, Dawson! Make it quick!"

"But—" Dawson began, startled. Then he saw Lonergan's spatulate thumb ease back on the drawn hammer, ready to release it. He heard Lonergan say:

"You heard me. Put your hands on top of your head before there's any more talk. Right now. I'm not givin' you another second."

There was no arguing about it at this point. Daw-

son put his hands together on the top of his head. He glanced sideways at Ned Parsons who was staring open-mouthed at the sheriff. Lonergan said to Parsons: "Go behind him and remove his hardware, Ned."

As Dawson felt his guns being slipped from their leather, he said: "What the hell kind of a hooraw is this, Lonergan? You'd better produce that list fast. Do that and the Government won't hear about this."

"There ain't no list," Lonergan said. His tiny mouth smiled around the cheroot in its corner. His shrewd little eyes danced wickedly. "Leastways, there ain't now. There was but I tore it up a few days after it got here, and I'd looked it over. I know the names of all the other U. S. marshals. There were a few new ones on that list, but none of them was Dawson and none of the descriptions fit you and there was no badge number like the one you gave me."

"But you don't have the list," Dawson objected. "How can you be sure?"

"I got one o' them memories that never forgets. That's why I didn't need to hold onto that list."

Dawson turned toward Ned Parsons, who was backing away from Dawson now, holding Dawson's own guns trained on him. The old nester's eyes were bleak with disillusionment.

"He's lyin'!" Dawson shouted. "Can't you see that, Mr. Parsons. He's got that list only he doesn't dare show it. He knows I'm telling the truth and for some reason he doesn't want my story backed up. I know there's such a list and my name on it because I saw it. So Lonergan *must* be lying!"

"Why?" Parsons demanded in a sepulchral voice. "Why would he want to do anything like that?"

"I don't know," Dawson said. "By the same token,

why would I barge in here and try to prove a lie, if it couldn't be proved? That would make me out a fool, wouldn't it? If I was going to cook up some kind of yarn to keep me out of trouble for being a member of the Risk bunch, I'd figure something that couldn't be disproved so easily. I—"

"That's easy," Lonergan broke in. "You reckoned I might not be here. Or else you took a chance I wouldn't have the list and wouldn't remember whether that name was on it or not. Or maybe you took a long chance there might be a Dawson on that list. It's a fairly common name." He shrugged. "Who knows what kind of fool or crooked reasoning goes through an owlhoot's mind? Especially when he's a maverick who's been booted out of his own bunch for some reason. You were desperate, Dawson, that's all. You knew that a member of the Risk group, isolated from the rest, wouldn't last long."

Dawson had no immediate answer for that. It was fast, glib logic. He saw that Ned Parsons was taken in by it, too. Parsons' mouth was twisted with the hate and loathing that is strong in a man who's just learned he's been hoodwinked.

"Not only that," Lonergan went on. "But chances are you *did* discover some secret exit from Hellion's Hole and figured this way you'd capitalize on it. Either to get in on the reward money for Risk and the others, or maybe just to get revenge on the herd that had booted you out. Whatever your game, Dawson, it's through."

Lonergan got up from the swivel chair, then, and Dawson saw that he was a short man almost as wide as he was high. But there was power and weight evident in his every mood. He said: "Turn around, Dawson."

Dawson said: Parsons, you've got to believe *me*. Lonergan's lying. Don't let him get away with this. Either he's in cahoots with Risk or he's figurin' on gettin' that reward money all for himself. He—"

Dawson suddenly broke off, remembering something. "Listen, he *must* be in with the gang. Two other marshals were killed so fast that the gang must've known they were coming. This is the answer. Those men made themselves known to Lonergan when they went through town and some way he must've got word to Risk, warning him. That's got to be it. And now he's going to lock me up and report my escape to Risk and tell him about the secret exit. Once he does that, the—"

Lonergan's gun jabbed so hard into his spine, Dawson's words were cut off. Lonergan said: "That's enough o' that kind of loco talk. Get walkin'. You want to talk some more, you can do it from a cell."

With the muzzle of the .44, he prodded Dawson out of the office and down a short hallway to two cells in the back of the building. He shoved Dawson into one of them and slammed the big iron barred door shut. He stood there grinning, revealing too small, too even-looking a set of dentures. "Talk all you want to, now, Dawson. Nobody'll hear you." Then he turned and headed back for the office.

For a long while Dawson stood by the door, his hands grasping the half-rusted bars, listening to the hum of conversation from the office up front, but he couldn't distinguish any of the words. Rage and frustration slowly built in him. Just as it seemed he had a chance of succeeding on his mission, an unforeseen factor like a crooked sheriff who was obviously on the Risk payroll, or one who didn't dare to buck the gang for some reason, was spoiling the whole setup.

Now Lonergan could get some word to the gang and they could easily defend themselves against any attempt to enter the Hole by way of the secret entrance under the Falls. They were safe there once they had that information. Then Lonergan could come back and release him, simply saying that he'd made a mistake, that he did now remember Dawson's name being on the list. Nobody could prove anything against him.

In mounting fury, Dawson shook the bars of the door and shouted and cursed Lonergan. But it did no good. Finally, he got control of himself again. He looked around the cell. It had only one window, high out of reach in the wall and it too was barred. The cell was bare of anything that could be used as a weapon or a battering ram. He was stuck there.

He sat down on the edge of the wooden cot and put his face in his hands and tried to think. But he didn't get anywhere with it. All he could think of was Callie Parson's face when her father would have returned and told her what had happened—that, apparently, he'd been right in the first place.

How long he sat there like that, brooding and trying to find an answer to his problem, Dawson didn't know. But when he finally stood up again, the cell was pitch dark. Through the barred door, dull light flowed from the office up front. And through the cell window came sounds of shouting and some kind of excitement going on out on Main Street. Dawson listened to that for a while and slowly realized that there was more than the usual night-time noises of a town getting ready for a night's fun. There was something ominous about this swelling murmur of sound, and slowly realization of what it meant penetrated

Dawson's consciousness. It was the sound of a mob riled up about something.

He went to the cell door and began once again to shake the bars and shout Lonergan's name. In a few minutes, he heard footsteps approaching along the hall. The squat little sheriff came up to the cell door. He was grinning broadly, his small green eyes slitted.

He said: "Somethin' botherin' you, Dawson?"

"Yeah," Dawson said. "All that noise out on the street. What's goin' on out there?"

"Little crowd formin'," Lonergan said, leaning lazily against the far wall, one hand resting on the butt of his .44 Frontier Colt, now sheathed in a holster around his thick hips. "Seems word got around that I'm holdin' one of the Risk gang in here. Reckon they want to take a little law into their own hands, Dawson. I told 'em I wasn't givin' up my prisoner, but after a while a mob like that gets real excited and they're hard to deal with."

"You mean that's a lynch mob forming out there?" Dawson said. He felt his stomach suddenly shrivel into a hard knot. "I didn't think they'd dare move against anyone they thought was connected in any way with Risk."

"They wouldn't, ordinarily. But they're convinced you've been ousted by the gang and Risk and his crowd won't care what's happened to you."

"Do you think you can stop 'em from breakin' in here?" Dawson asked. His fists gripped the cell-door bars so hard the knuckles stood out whitely. "You've got to, Lonergan. You know what'll happen to you if you let 'em hang a United States marshal. And you know damned well who I am!"

"Look," Lonergan said lazily, "my duty is to protect my prisoner, no matter who he is. That I'll do to the

best of my ability. But when a mob like that one really gets excited, they're not going to let one law officer or any barred doors keep them from getting what they want."

"But—but why are they so worked up against *me*?" Dawson demanded. "Killing me won't get rid of Risk and the rest of the bunch. What good will it do?"

"You don't understand the people around here," Lonergan said. He took a celluloid toothpick from his vest pocket, dug between his dentures with it. "They've taken a lot from that gang. And they've been helpless to strike back. All that resentment has built up in them and now you sort of—how you say it?—symbolize the whole gang. Hangin' you will give 'em a chance to let off steam. Let me tell you some o' the reasons why this town and the ranchers and homesteaders from all around here hate anything connected with the Risk gang so badly."

He took a long narrow cheroot from his shirt pocket and nipped the end off, stuck it in his mouth and lit it with a stove match swiped across the seat of his trousers.

"They've drunk up thousands of dollars worth of liquor on old man Bosworth who owns the Four Leaf Clover, in addition to bustin' up his place several times," Lonergan said. "They've swiped tons of grain from the feed store. They've helped themselves to saddle rigs, guns, ammunition. In addition to all their thieving they've taken a notion to two or three women here in town. Two of those women were married to highly respected town citizens. The husband of one of them went loco and tried to attack the whole gang single-handed. He was shot down like a prairie dog. They also kidnaped the wives of a couple of nesters,

and it was quite a few hours later before the women were let loose.

"So you can figger for yourself, Dawson, why this town is all excited about havin' one o' that bunch within its reach, even though you, personally, might not have had anything to do with those particular incidents. A mob with those things on its mind, ain't likely to be reasonable. I give 'em about another hour before they get really riled up and storm in here."

Dawson pressed his face against the cold bars. Hoarsely he said: "You could get me out of here, Lonergan. You could hide me out somewhere. I—I'll make a deal, Lonergan. I'll forget this double cross of yours. I'll somehow see to it that you get *all* the reward money when we finally get Nick Risk and the others. Surely there isn't that much money in it for you to play along with the gang. They've only got \$85,000 cached away in the Hole. And they haven't even got that now. I hid it in a new place."

Lonergan came away from the wall slowly. His moon face hardened. "What? You found their loot?"

Swiftly, then, Dawson told him what he'd left out before—the finding of the loot. When he was finished, Lonergan said: "Ah, you're just tryin' to lie your way out of this tight. And even if you weren't, nobody'll ever get that reward money because, secret entrance or not, nobody's goin' into that hideout and capture or wipe out that whole bunch. And even if they could there's still nothing I can do. There's no back door out of this building. You think that mob out there would let me march you out and away, right under their noses? No dice, Dawson."

He turned and headed back to his office as the sounds from the street rose angrily and there was suddenly the noise of a barrage of rocks being hurled

at the front door. Dawson stood listening to the sounds of the mob rising, getting more threatening. He wondered how long it would be before they finally decided to take the law into their own hands and come in and get him. From the sound of things, it wouldn't be very long, now.

Chapter Six

THEY WERE like all mobs, full of a sense of their own power. They were uncontrolled, restless, seething like a vat of soured mash working. They were loud to cover their own uncertainty, and they were a little afraid of their own viciousness because they knew that if any man voiced the wrong thing this group-monster of their own creation could just as readily turn on him.

On some of the faces in the ruddy glow of pine-knot torches there was open sadistic enjoyment. In others, guilt glowed uncertainly in their eyes. Even those who were aware that this was wrong, couldn't leave, so great was the fascination of the human animal at its worst, bunched-up and crying for blood like a pack of rabid wolves.

Some of the men carried rifles. Nearly all packed sixguns on their hips. Some held chunks of wood as makeshift clubs. There were a few women, mostly from the Four Leaf Clover and the second floor back

rooms of the hotel, at the edges of the mob. Children squatted in the shadows of the buildings along the street, frightened, yet hoping they wouldn't be discovered and choused home before the real excitement began.

Up front of the crowd of fifty or so men were the mob's ringleaders. There was Boris Lee, who ran a dance hall often frequented by the Risk gang. There was Dan Finch, the town drunk, who swamped at the Four Leaf Clover when he couldn't get his liquor money any other way. And Lew Vines, who was in jail regularly every week for beating up his ninety-pound wife. These three were men for whom the decent citizens of the town had no use ordinarily. They were the first to run and hole up when they heard the Risk bunch was heading for Carthage. But now they were strongest in their denunciation of the Hellions' Hole gang and bravest with their words of what should be done now that they had the full backing of the mob behind them.

"I tell you we got to break in there and get that Dawson scalawag and string him up fast without any more fool talk about it!" Boris Lee shouted. "It'll be a lesson to the rest o' those owlhoots from the Hole!"

The mob behind him shouted their approval. It made no difference that they knew that Dawson wasn't representative of the Risk gang and as far as they knew, was a maverick and the outlaws wouldn't care what happened to him. The mob was beyond all reason.

"Are we goin' to continue to let ourselves be buffaloed by that bunch?" Dan Finch demanded. "We've put up with 'em a long time. When we see one of them kick his last kick at the end of a rope just like any other man, we won't be afraid of 'em anymore."

"What about Lonergan?" someone demanded. "He says he's bound to protect his prisoner!"

Lew Vines laughed, his bloated face sheened with sweat, his eyes popping in the torch light. "What you expect him to do, just step aside and say, sure, boys, just go right ahead with your lynchin'? Hell, he's got to make it look like he's carryin' out his sworn duties. But I'll bet if we start in there after Dawson, he won't give us any trouble."

A tall, stooped man stood there in the front ranks, his face showing the broken spirit behind it. His eyes glowed wildly. Ordinarily he was a law-abiding, God-fearing man, this Marcus Branner, but tonight, stirred by the vengeance lust of the crowd, he kept thinking of the time his wife Ella had been held prisoner by the Risk mob for four hours. He remembered the hurt way she'd looked when she'd returned home, and the hatred in him finally flowed over. Wildly he shouted: "They're right! This is our first chance to get at those coyotes! We'll show 'em we can fight back."

Friends of Branner took up the cry then and that was the turning point. In a solid body the men moved toward the door of the jailhouse. Lonergan flung it open as they approached. He held his hands over the .44's at his hips. He spread his short stocky legs.

He said: "Hold it, gents! I can't let you break into my jail! You can't take the law into your own hands!"

Feeling the power of the mob behind them and sensing the lack of any genuine defiance in Lonergan, Lee and Finch jumped him. Between them, they held him powerless. Or seemingly so. Ordinarily, Lonergan could have whipped them both with one hand behind his back. But now he made only token resistance as Boris Lee shouted:

"We've got the lawman! We'll take care of him. The rest of you go in there and get Dawson!"

The mob surged past the sheriff and the men who were holding him. As they did so, Finch snatched a ring of keys from the sheriff's belt and tossed them to the foremost men in the mob.

Back in his cell, Ben Dawson heard them coming. If there had been fear in him before, it had now given way to rage—an almost insane rage at the stupidity of his fellow humans; at the irony of this, of a U. S. law officer in danger of being hanged like one of the outlaws he hunted. At the same time he knew for the first time what it was like to be the prey of an unreasoning mob and told himself that if he ever lived through this episode, he'd do everything in his power from now on to fight against men taking the law into their own hands.

When the mob reached the cell door, the torches some of them carried inside lit up their twisted, snarling faces. Their angry cries mixed in with his own, in a garbled gibberish that made no sense. But Dawson could hear his own words as the cell door banged open and they swarmed in toward him. He yelled:

"Stay away from me! You'll get me eventually, but I'll kill the first man who tries to touch me! Get back, damn you all, get back!"

But there was no stopping them now. The ring-leaders, however, sensing that Dawson was not going to give in without a battle, had run true to form and squeezed away from the front of the crowd. It was four of the other men who finally closed in on Dawson. He floored two of them, instantly, with two murderous, enraged punches. But two more immediately closed in to take their places.

Someone grabbed Dawson's arms. A chunk of wood

crashed glancingly off his head, hard enough to make rubber out of his knee joints and daze him. For a moment the crowd screams faded and the hate-twisted faces surrounding Dawson blurred all together. When he recovered, he was being dragged out onto the street. He tried once more, vainly, to struggle, but they held him too firmly now. Two men held each of his legs and two others lugged him by each arm. He was as helpless as a roped yearling.

Someone produced a rope and swiftly lashed his hands behind his back. Now that they had him out of the jailhouse, a silence fell over the mob. All that could be heard was their harsh breathing. Dawson tried to talk, to argue with them, but his words came out in harsh, grating sounds that were shouted down by the leaders.

From the rear of the crowd a man shouted. "Maybe we'd better not string him up! Wouldn't it be just as good to run him out of town on a rail, along with a dose of tar and feathers?"

A few others weakly seconded this motion, but Boris Lee cried: "Hell, no! There's only one way to stop a sidewinder like this and that's to make him dance on thin air! Get him up on a horse and let's head for that big cottonwood at the north end of Main Street."

Rough hands grabbed Dawson and boosted him up onto the saddle of a bay mare. He sat there, erectly now, his jaw jutting, his eyes unflinching. If it had to be, Dawson told himself, he wouldn't give them the satisfaction of listening to him beg for mercy, of watching him cringe.

A few minutes later, as the mob, prodding the horse and its wrist-bound rider moved away from the jailhouse and headed toward the end of the street, Ed

Lonergan emerged from his office. There was a smug grin on his moonlike face as he walked to the livery next door. The place was empty, the livery owner being one of the mob. Lonergan saddled up his own horse, rode out of the livery and turned down a side street and then, breaking his mount into a gallop, rode around the edge of the town.

Past the outskirts, when he cut back to the main trail, he looked back over his shoulder and saw the flare of the torches of the lynch mob and the huge black shadows thrown by the cottonwood tree that was going to serve as their gallows. He chuckled contentedly and spurred the horse on toward the Hole-In-The-Wall country. This was going to be a good night's work for him. He'd make Nick Risk pay plenty for the information about the way Dawson had escaped from Hellions' Hole.

Outside the town, just before they reached the giant cottonwood, the mob halted briefly as a buckboard drove up beside them at breakneck speed and then braked hard. A young woman sat on the high front seat. She was wild-eyed and her long yellow hair was no longer neatly coiled and bunched at the back of her head. It streamed down her back. Her cheeks were flushed and her firm, ripe lips were drawn back across her teeth in horror as she looked across the heads of the mob toward Dawson.

"Ben!" she shouted. "What are they doing to you? Are they out of their minds? Papa told me what was going on in town and I rode here as soon as I could." Her eyes swung around the uptilted faces of the men in the mob. Some of them looked a little sheepish, but most of them were still angry and defiant, resentful of this sudden interference.

"Listen to me, all of you," Callie Parsons shouted.

"You're making a mistake This man isn't one of the Risk mob. He's really a U. S. marshal, who pretended to join the Risk bunch in an effort to regain some stolen money. That's the truth! He's a marshal! You've got to turn him loose at once!"

Catcalls of derision greeted this statement. A man shouted: "Prove that, honey, and we'll do as you say. You ain't got no proof!"

Another man shouted: "I hear tell she nursed this maverick back to health. She's probably sweet on him! Don't pay any attention to anything she says!"

"You'll all be sorry," Callie told them. "You'll have the death of an innocent man on your souls forever. And you'll all stand trial for murder once the story gets back to Ben Dawson's headquarters. The government won't stand for this kind of treatment of one of its officers! Take him back to the jail, if you want, but give him at least another twenty-four hours to prove who he really is. I'll get that proof. I'll head for Laramie, tonight. Please!"

"You'd best turn around and head back home, Miss Parsons," Marcus Branner told her. "We're doin' this for the sake of women like you, so you'll be safe in your own homes. We're not makin' any mistake. Now stay out of this before you get hurt!"

Once again the mob started its slow walk toward the cottonwood. When Callie Parsons saw that she had pleaded in vain, she seized a buggy whip from the seat beside her and leaped down into the crowd, swinging the whip from side to side as she tried to force her way through to Dawson.

"I won't let you!" she cried. "I won't let you hang him! He's innocent, I tell you!"

Ben Dawson watched all this with mixed feelings of fear and pride. He was fearful that the mob might

turn its fury on Callie and seriously injure her. At the same time his heart swelled with pride that this fine young woman would single-handed try to fight an angry, lynch-mad mob to try to help him. He knew right then that if he managed somehow to live through all this, that Callie Parsons was the woman for him. Somehow, if he lived through this, they'd find a way to work out a plan for a life together. He knew that now.

But as Callie lashed about her with the whip, Dawson called out for her to stop, telling her it was no use, that she'd only get the mob more incensed. His cries, however, were lost in the roar of anger that went up from the crowd as Callie tried to beat her way through them. Two men grabbed her arms while another wrested the whip from her. Then they carried her, still kicking and struggling, back to the buckboard and forced her back up onto the seat. Someone slapped the rump of the roan hitched to the buckboard and sent the rig careening off toward town.

"Go tell your troubles to the sheriff," someone jeeringly yelled after her.

Then their attention was once more turned toward Dawson. Boris Lee, who had grabbed the buggy whip away from Callie, now pushed through to Dawson. He was grinning crookedly, showing rotted stumps of teeth. He said: "You hear the way she talked about him, boys? You see the fight she put up to save this sneakin' owlhoot?" He turned to the men around him. "It ain't hard to figger that out, is it? This dirty varmint repaid the kindness of a man who took him into his house by soft-talkin' the man's daughter and—"

Dawson's voice, sharp with futile rage, cut him off: "You're a foul-mouthed dirty, lyin' pig!"

A hush fell over the crowd. Boris Lee, his ugly face swelling with rage, raised the whip over his head. "Take that back!" he commanded. "Apologizel"

"Here's your apology," Dawson told him. He spat full into Lee's angry face.

Boris Lee then went berserk. He swung the whip, lashing it across Dawson's face. Red welts leaped out across Dawson's cheeks and forehead. He swayed dizzily in the saddle and Lee struck him four times before another man leaped out of the mob and snatched the whip from Lee's hand.

"Stop that, you fool!" he cried. "You want to beat him to death and spoil the hangin'?"

Lee was quieted down and the mob pushed on toward the cottonwood. Dawson's face was now a pain-filled swollen mask. As the horse was halted under a long, thick branch of the cottonwood and one of the men fashioned a noose and swung it up over the limb, Dawson fought to remain calm, to refrain from what he knew would be useless pleading for a stay of execution.

While the rope was being prepared, a pimply-faced youth in his twenties gleefully said: "Mebbe we should have brought that gal with us, too. She was sweet on him, wasn't she? She'd have turned him free if she could. That makes her as guilty as him. Double-hangin' is the best. Especially when one of 'em is a woman. You should hear the fuss a female cuts up when she sees that noose ready to drop around her neck."

Some of the men cursed. One of them said: "Shut up, Dexter. We ain't got that low yet that we stoop to hangin' a woman."

Dexter licked his thinned lips. "Ah, you old fogies just don't know how to handle an affair like this. This

ain't the first necktie party I've been to. We had one down in the Sweetwater country that was a dilly. You heard tell of Cattle Kate, ain't you? Well, I was there when they strung her and Jim Averill up, four years back."

"Yeah, that must've been a real big affair," Finch said. "I heard that when the punchers came to Bothwell of a Saturday night, Jim Averill would get their money and Kate would get them to put her brand on some of their cattle. The fenced pasture near their homestead was always filled with beef, the best stock. Kate got the men drunk and tricked them out of their beef."

"That's right," Dexter answered. "But down there in that Sweetwater country they knew how to take care of a situation like that. Bunch o' ranchers finally accused Kate and Jim of rustling, ordered 'em to leave the country. When they didn't do that, a gang of cowmen took them to Spring Creek Gulch and without any more talk about it dangled 'em from a tree as neat as you ever did see. Any o' you ever see a woman hung?"

Nobody answered. The expressions of the men around Dexter showed disgust but their eyes also held a certain fascination. Smearing spittle from the corners of his mouth with the back of one hand, Dexter informed his rapt audience: "You should of hear that Cattle Kate scream and whine. You think a woman cain't cuss? And you should have heard the offers she made if they'd take that rope from around her throat. I'm a-tellin' you, that there double lynchin' was a sight to really break the sweat out of you." He poked out his lower lip ruefully. "We could of had the same thing here, if we'd grabbed Dawson's girl. But you hombres was all too lily-livered."

"Aw, shut up, Dexter," a fat man told him. "You're makin' us sick to our stomachs. In these parts we don't hang females. Especially just for makin' a fool of herself over a man. . . . Let's get on with this thing if we're goin' to do it."

The hemp noose was then dropped about Dawson's neck. The crowd was completely silent now. They fell back away from the horse and the man astride him, under the rope dangling over the limb of the cottonwood. Dawson closed his eyes and said a prayer that his daughter Laurie would be well taken care of, that the shock of hearing about this would be held back from her until she was a little older. Under him, the bay skittered nervously and for a moment the noose began to tighten about his neck. But one of the men patted and steadied the animal.

Then Dan Finch said, hoarsely, his voice trembling: "Everything all set? Everybody ready to see this stinkin' owlhoot dance his dead man's rigadoon?"

There was no answer. Finch raised a whip to slash the flank of the horse, to send him hurtling out from under Dawson and leave him dangling in the flickering torchlight and shadows. But before Finch could bring about the blow, two shots, a half mile south, toward town, ripped into the silence of the night. Every one turned toward the sound. They saw two more gun flashes splash angrily against the darkness. Then they heard the rattling of wagon wheels. They saw another torch being held over the head of the wagon's driver, being waved back and forth as if in some kind of signal.

Cries went up of: "Who's that? Someone's riding out from town, hell-for-leather! Better get that critter out from under Dawson before there's any more interruptions!"

"No, hold it!" Marcus Branner said. "Whoever it is seems to be trying to signal us. Let's hold on a minute."

"Probably that fool Parsons gal," Lew Vines said. "Got herself a hawglaig and is goin' to try and shoot us all down."

"Yeah, maybe it is," Lonny Dexter said. His pimply face glowed with excitement. "Let's wait and if she tries any rough stuff, we'll make a necktie for her, too. We'll have a double-hangin' just like down in Sweetwater with Cattle Kate. I sure would like to see that Parson gal's pretty legs kickin' at the air."

The speeding buckboard was close enough now for the torch Callie Parsons was waving to reveal her identity. The wagon careened to a stop a few feet away from the group. Wide-eyed, her long golden hair a tangled mess about her shoulders, Callie Parsons tossed the torch she'd been carrying to the ground. In her other hand, she held a .45. She looked across the heads of the mob toward Ben Dawson still sitting, white-faced and tight-lipped, astride the roan, the noose about his neck.

"Thank God!" Callie cried. "I was afraid I'd be too late." She thrust a hand inside the bodice of her dress and pulled forth a printed sheet of paper. "I've got proof of who Dawson really is—proof that Ed Lonergan was lying. It's right here for you all to see. Now get that noose from around that poor man's neck before that horse gets nervous and takes a notion to run."

While the mob closed about the buckboard in stunned silence, Callie told how she'd gone to the sheriff's office to try and enlist his help in breaking up the lynching. When she found nobody there, she searched the lawman's desk. She found the list of

U. S. marshals that Lonergan claimed he had thrown away. Now she handed the paper down to one of the men.

He scanned it and said: "Got the government seal on it, all right. Looks genuine."

"Of course it's the real thing," Callie said impatiently. "You think I had it printed up special? Look at it."

"Yep," said the man who had taken the list. "Here's Dawson's name, all right. And the description fits him. Looks like his story is straight, all right. What's your badge number, Dawson?" When Dawson told him, the man said. "That checks, too. That's the convincer. He couldn't know that unless he was Dawson, the marshal. Looks like we've all been makin' big-time fools of ourselves. Looks like we owe Dawson here an apology and then some. And Miss Parsons a big vote of thanks for savin' us from makin' the biggest mistake of our lives."

All the men looked at each other and then at Dawson and the cottonwood, and then their eyes turned to the ground and they hung their heads sheepishly. Callie Parsons got down from the buckboard and went over and removed the noose from around Dawson's neck and untied his wrists. As he chafed circulation back into them, some of the men from the mob came toward him, muttering apologies.

"Forget that for now," Dawson said. "There's something more important. I've got a hunch Lonergan's on his way to warn the Risk mob about that secret entrance to the Hole. He's got to be stopped. If he feels fairly safe and isn't hurrying too much, we may be able to catch him. If one of you'll loan me your irons, I'll take off after him right now, on this roan."

Then Dawson told the bunch his plans. He asked for volunteers for a posse of twenty men. Ten of them

would hem in the west entrance to Hellions' Hole, shoot down any of the Risk bunch who tried to escape that way. The other ten would enter the Hole, through the tunnel next to the waterfall, one at a time. They would then advance on the owlhoot camp and catch them by surprise.

"We'll have a good chance of catchin' most of the pack unarmed, maybe round 'em all up without firing a shot. That is, if I can get to Lonergan before he reaches the Hole-In-The-Wall country. All who want to volunteer step forward. There'll be at least ten thousand dollars, perhaps a lot more, to split between you, if we bring this bunch to justice. And I get no part of that. This is just part of my job."

Nobody moved. Dawson sucked in his breath. "I see," he said. "You were a pretty brave bunch, a little while ago, going into a jail cell after an unarmed man. You had a lot of poison in you all worked up against the Risk bunch, enough to make you want to hang a man without a trial. But I guess this is different. When it comes to freeing your town from the rule of this outlaw gang the right way, it looks like too dangerous a job for you, doesn't it? You mean to tell me there isn't one man in this group with guts enough to stand up against Nick Risk and his gang?"

Some of the faces reddened with anger. Dawson said: "You were offering me apologies. That was easy. How about really makin' up for that poor judgment of yours by sidin' me in this raid?"

Somebody had to make the first move. It was Marcus Branner. And then one by one the men stepped forward. Finally Dawson had more than the twenty he needed. All of the men except the ringleaders of the lynch mob—Vines, Finch and Lee—were now among the volunteers. Dawson waved away several

of the older men. He told the ones who were left to head back to town and saddle up horses and then ride as fast as they could toward the Big Horns. He told them that if he caught up with Lonergan, he'd wait for them. If he was too late to head off the sheriff, if Lonergan had already reached Hellions' Hole, Dawson would ride back and meet the group from town and they'd have to make new plans.

After the men had started back toward town, Callie Parsons moved toward Dawson. She stood very close to him. Her cool fingers touched the whip-welts on his face. "Ben," she murmured. "Poor Ben."

He gripped her arms. "Callie," he said, his voice breaking a little. "I—I just don't know what to say. Thanks is such a poorly word to offer for a thing like you did tonight."

"You don't need to thank me," she told him, her eyes shining up at him. "I did it for myself too, Ben. If anything happened to you, why, it—it . . ." Her voice trailed off. She moved against him and rested her head against his chest. "I—I reckon I'm makin' a silly fool of myself," she said.

He reached down and tilted up her chin, turning her face toward his once more. "Callie," he whispered. "I don't know how this business at the Hole is going to turn out. But if I come out of it all right, we'll have lots of things to talk over. We'll have a lot of plans to make."

Her lips curved upward in a soft smile. "Yes, Ben," she said. "Yes, we will. And you—you will come back to me. I know it. Everything will be all right. It's got to be."

And then their lips moved together and he held her tightly. When he finally let her go, he walked quickly away and swung up into the saddle of the

roan. Without looking back at her, he dug in his heels and swung toward the trail that led to the mountains. He heard her call his name but he still didn't look back. He knew he didn't dare, if he was going to go through with this night's work. He bent low over the mare's neck and drove her hard and relentlessly.

Chapter Seven

IT WAS several hours later that Dawson again rode into the high, rough-hewn area of the Red Wall country. He splashed through the shallows of Middle Fork and Buffalo Creek, the mare now laboring and blowing with exhaustion. Dawson knew that the animal couldn't keep up this terrific pace much longer, yet Ed Lonergan was still not in sight. A peach slice of bright yellow moon had popped out from behind clouds and the whole area for several miles was lighted in a ghostly glow. Then, just as Dawson was beginning to think he wasn't going to catch up to the sheriff before he reached the sanctuary of the Hole-In-The-Wall section, he caught sight of a figure on horseback jogging over a rocky rise about a mile ahead.

Dawson coaxed and heeled the tiring mare into renewed speed. The next time the rider ahead moved into sight, he was considerably closer. Dawson knew, though, that very soon now the sound of his hoof-

beats would carry up to Lonergan. The sheriff would look back and spot his pursuit. His horse would be comparatively fresh after an easy, unpressed ride. He would be able to outdistance Dawson once he put the pressure on. Dawson decided to abandon the idea of riding down the other man. There was only one alternative left.

Dismounting about a half mile farther on, Dawson climbed to the top of a large, round rock. From there he had a clear view of the horse and rider silhouetted boldly in the moon glow, a couple of hundred yards ahead. Dawson drew one of his borrowed .45's. He took careful aim—not at the rider up ahead of him—but at the larger target of his horse. His thumb released the hammer. The sound of the shot blasted ringing echoes back and forth over the rocky terrain, bounced them from canyon walls.

Up ahead, Dawson saw the horse rear on its hind legs. He saw Lonergan swivel around in the saddle. Dawson fired once more just as Lonergan's mount brought its forefeet down once again. The animal leaped forward as Lonergan gouged it with his heels. But then it stumbled and fell and Dawson said a prayer of thanks that one of his shots had luckily caught the other man's mount. He saw Lonergan pitch over the wounded animal's neck. He saw the horse rise and hobble away on three legs. But Lonergan lay still, apparently dazed or perhaps even hurt badly by the fall.

Dawson ran toward him, both guns in his hand. It seemed to take forever for him to run over that rocky, uneven ground, but at last the sprawled figure of Lonergan was only about ten yards away. Just as Dawson started to call his name, Lonergan suddenly rose onto his elbows. spurts of yellow fire blasted from

his guns as he aimed them pointblank at Dawson, catching him by surprise.

Dawson felt one of the slugs pick at the sleeve of his shirt. The other one seared white-hot flame across his temple. Dawson flung himself sideways to the ground, cursing his stupidity for being taken in by Lonergan's possum act. The sheriff let loose with three more shots, wild ones, and then scrambled to his feet and started to run, staggeringly, along the floor of the canyon.

Dawson told himself that two could play the same game. He lay as he had fallen, without moving. But his face was turned toward Lonergan. He watched the other man run another twenty yards and then turn and slowly stumble to a stop. He stood there, looking back at the inert heap that was Dawson, still sprawled on the ground.

Lonergan's guns blazed two more orange flashes and the lead reamed up rock and dirt a few inches from Dawson, one of the shots ricocheting off into the blackness. Dawson swore to himself, and as Lonergan turned and walked back toward him, Dawson knew that he couldn't let the other man risk another shot at closer range. Lonergan was now between Dawson and the light of the moon, presenting a perfect black shadow of target.

"Hold it, Lonergan," Dawson said. "I've got a dead bead on you. Move another step and I'll slam one right through your gizzard. Stand, Lonergan!"

The other man blazed a quick shot as he flung himself sideways. But Dawson's .45 spat blood-red flame and the slug hit Lonergan, twirled him around before he hit the ground. Dawson heard Lonergan's cry of pain and then his sobbing moans as he writhed on

the ground. Before he got to his feet, Dawson called out:

"Toss your irons toward me. Throw 'em hard and far, out of your reach, if you want to live."

He waited and listened to Lonergan cursing him. Then he saw the other man's guns flash through the moonlight and heard them clatter to the ground. Dawson got up and ran toward the sound. He scooped up Lonergan's .44's and moved on toward the wounded man.

"Where did it take you?" Dawson asked.

"In the hip and the shoulder," Lonergan whispered, his voice tight with pain. "How—now did you get away from that mob, Dawson. I—thought you were done for. I wasn't even worried about anybody coming after me."

Dawson chuckled drily. "They didn't tie the bow of that necktie tight enough," he said. Then he told Lonergan what had happened. "The others will be along soon. They'll probably have wound dressings and ointments with them, so stop moaning and groaning like that. We'll probably be able to save your miserable hide. At least long enough for you to stand trial along with what's left of the Risk gang after we clean out their hideout."

Actually it was nearly an hour later before the band of horsemen from Carthage arrived to join Dawson. Some of them wanted to shoot Lonergan, finish him off right then and there, but Dawson restrained them. He dressed Lonergan's wound and then bound his wrists and ankles and propped him up against a rock.

"You'd better say a few prayers that we come out on top in this fracas," Dawson told him. "If we get wiped out, you'll be buzzard bait tomorrow."

Then he gathered the men about him and described

in as much detail as possible the lay of the land in Hellions' Hole, along with the habits of the outlaw camp. He split the twenty into two groups, picking what looked like the hardiest and most courageous of the bunch to go with him. To the other ten, he said:

"When you get near the west entrance to the cut, pick spots behind rock outcroppings where you'll be shielded by gunfire from the sentries, and yet be able to gun down any who try to break from the Hole. They may open fire on you and they may not, at first. It doesn't make much difference. But if we succeed, inside the Hole, some of them, or at least the sentries, are going to try to escape through that western exit. That's when you men have got to look sharp and not let any of them get through. Give them a chance to throw down their guns and surrender. If they don't do it, smoke 'em down."

To his own group, Dawson said: "There's a likely looking section of the Wall for climbing, right near here. When we get to the top, I'll lead you to the entrance to that underground tunnel."

The men tossed off brief good-byes, some essayed jocular remarks, and then they separated. The ones who were going on up the canyon to take care of the west exit from the Hole rode off in a compact group. The other ten followed Dawson as he found the best spot for climbing the wall, and started up the long, steep climb, searching out foot- and hand-holds. It was a dangerous and painstaking task, requiring alertness and steady nerves every moment. Every man was too intent on making the long climb safely to bother talking.

Just as most of the group neared the top of the wall, there was suddenly the sound of shale and

stones rattling down the cliff. After that a thin, animal-like scream tore the quiet of the night. The others all looked back and saw one of their group sliding down the face of the wall, both hands clawing for a hold. They didn't find it. Then he hit a jut of rock and was thrown out into space. The moonlight caught at the white oval of his face and glittered on his belt buckle as he seemed to turn lazily in the air before finally dropping out of sight in the darkness far below.

There was the dull, sickening thud of a body crashing against the rocks at the bottom of the cliff just as the shrill, agonized screaming cut off. For a sickening second the echo of the scream belted across the canyon. Then the silence set in again, broken only by the occasional screech of a night bird.

"Good God!" one of the men said. "That—that was Macray. His foot must've slipped or a rock loosened when he grabbed it. He—what are we going to do? He may be lying down there bad hurt—if he's alive. Dawson, we can't just let him lie down there in the dark like that."

Dawson shuddered. He waited, listening. There was no sound at all from below. He said: "Chances are he didn't live through that. And if anybody goes back down to see, chances are he'd fall, too. It's more difficult climbing down this wall—especially in the dark—than it is to go up it. We can't afford to lose another man. We're going to be outnumbered plenty as it is. We've got to go on to the top. And just hope that poor Macray was killed outright. I think the chances are good that he was."

The rest of them finished the climb and on the broad flat mesa atop the Red Wall, they huddled to-

gether, their faces pale in the moonlight, their breathing heavy.

"That was rough," Dawson told them. "But don't let it get on your nerves. He might have been killed later in the fighting, anyhow. We've got to keep cool and not get rattled by anything, if this is going to work. Let's get going now. Follow me."

Dawson got his bearings from the stars and started off across the mesa in the general direction of Hellions' Hole. As he walked, he remembered the last time he'd made his way across the top of the Wall, like this, in the opposite direction. It seemed as though that was a lot longer than a few weeks back. So much had happened since then. He hadn't known that there was such a woman as Callie Parsons, then. He looked up at the peaceful serenity of the star-studded night sky, an awesomely vast and glittering arch above them. He wondered why men couldn't be content with all the good things that were free, the beauty of a quiet night, the pleasant tiredness after a hard day's work and the companionship of a good and lovely woman. He wondered why they lusted after riches and power so much that they were willing to rob and maim and kill to get it.

Pictures of Callie kept dancing through Dawson's mind as he walked with the rest of the men, silently across the broad and rocky expanse of the mesa. The way she had looked that first time he'd seen her, when he was in bed, sick and helpless with fever. The way she'd looked when they'd said good-bye, when he left their homestead. The blazing anger of her when she'd tried to fight her way through a vengeance-mad lynch mob to try and save him. The warmth and softness of her, earlier tonight, when

he'd held her close for a moment, when they'd said good-bye again.

A choking came into his throat as he wondered if that was the final farewell, if he'd ever see her again. Why was it, he wondered, that after all these years, when he'd finally found another woman he could love, that it had to be at a time that might be too late. If he had met Callie earlier, his whole life might have been changed. He probably wouldn't have taken a U. S. marshal's job. He— Dawson suddenly cut his thoughts off. He was getting mawkish as a lovesick schoolboy, he chided himself.

He looked across the moonlight-dappled flat of the mesa and saw far to the left a dark streak that he figured to be the cut through the Red Wall called Hellions' Hole. He headed more to the left, in that direction. When they reached the edge of the cut, Dawson signalled the others to silence and they all crawled on their bellies toward the edge of the cliff and peered over it and down into the outlaw hideout.

Three or four campfires glowed like firefly lights down there, hundreds of feet below them. A couple of men were seen as tiny figures, moving about the fires.

"Looks like most of the camp is asleep by now," Dawson whispered. "If our boys aren't discovered by the sentries at the west end, they'll stay that way until we wake 'em up. We ought to be able to slip up on the sentries and overpower them and then take the rest, have them covered before they wake up."

"You make it sound easy, Dawson," Pete Macue, who owned the Carthage livery, said. He grinned, wryly. "You got me thinkin' how I'm goin' to spend that reward money already."

"It might work out that way," Dawson said. "If we

get the breaks. If we get all of them. But if we get a few bad ones, we're goin' to find ourselves with so much hot lead singin' around our skulls, we'll think it's rainin' bullets. Let's get goin' again. We've still got a couple of miles until we reach the east end of the cut."

They got up and made their way along the edge of the cliffs until they reached the end. Here the roar of the waterfall spouting out from the middle of the east precipice made talking impossible. It took Dawson nearly a half hour to locate the clump of bushes that concealed the small opening to the underground tunnel. Then he started down it first, with the others following him in single file. The long, winding, down-slanting journey along the tunnel was made without incident. But when Dawson finally emerged from the mouth of the cave, under the waterfall, on the narrow ledge, he made a frightening discovery.

The last time he had stood on this spot, the glow from the torches of Risk and his men, below, had shone through the spray and mist, partially lighted up the ledge so that he could see where was stepping. But now it was inky black here under the outward rushing torrent of water. Dawson looked down and could not see his feet. Chills ran through him that had nothing to do with the cold spray from the Falls that was drenching him. As the others emerged from the cave, behind him, Dawson reached back and signalled for them to halt. He leaned close to the man behind him and shouted directly into his ear:

"This is going to be dangerous. The ledge is narrow and slippery. We'll have to move an inch at a time, with our backs flat against the wall. Tell the others that as we move along, they're to keep both arms outstretched. If their fingertips touch, the one behind

must wait and let the others get a little ahead of them. No man can be within reach of the one in front or behind him at any time. That way, if one slips and falls, he won't grab another and take him along too. Understand?"

The other nodded and as the men emerged from the cave, one by one, the word was passed along. Dawson led the way, moving along the slippery, narrow ledge. Several times he felt his feet start to slide out from under him and quickly, deftly, he shifted his position just in time. It seemed to take hours to move even a few feet, but then he eased out to where the spray was not so thick and finally reached a point where the ledge beneath his feet was dry and water no longer blew into his face. He let out a sigh of relief and looked back and watched the others ease out behind him, one at a time. He counted them and miraculously, nobody had slipped. They hadn't lost a man.

From the ledge, Dawson could see far down the cut, toward the small flickering lights that was the outlaw encampment. He moved along until he found the right place to start the downward climb to the floor of the cut. At the bottom, Dawson looked up at the stars, then said:

"We've got about three hours before dawn and we've got five miles to walk before we reach the camp. We're goin' to have to hustle our tails."

They began the long hike at a fast pace. The men moved without talking now, not only because there was the chance that the sound of their voices might be carried down the cut, but because they were getting too tense to engage in idle conversation. Dawson could sense the nervousness building in them. He was still a little surprised that he had been able to talk

this bunch into coming along with him, considering the fear and awe in which the Risk bunch was held. Here were men who wouldn't even dare to try and defend their own town against the rowdy onslaught of the gang, now invading the owlhoot's own hideout.

Dawson grinned to himself in the darkness. It sort of proved the old saying that things always work out for the best. He had an idea that if it hadn't been for the shame and guilt these men had felt over the lynching episode that he couldn't have talked some of them into siding him on this invasion for love or money. Not even the big reward money that was involved. He had no fear, though, about any of his men turning yellow on him. When the trouble started, they'd have to fight for their lives. They were trapped here in the cut now. It was going to be kill or get killed. There was no backing out at this stage.

Dawn was still more than an hour away when Dawson signaled for the group to halt and check their weapons. They were in the shadow of a grove of balsam poplars, the air thick with the tree's sweet, resinous scent. Dawson whispered:

"We're only a few hundred yards from the outskirts of the camp, if I've figured rightly. From here on, the slightest sound might mean the difference between life and death for all of us. Move slowly and cautiously. When you come into actual sight of the camp, stop right there. I'll figure out then what our next move will be."

They moved along through the darkness, then, staying on the creek-edge trail where the going was easier and there weren't many rocks to be dislodged or old logs and branches to trip over or break. In another ten minutes they came into sight of the camp and the men all came to a halt. Dawson saw that

three campfires were lit. In front of one of them, two men whom he recognized as Hoss Honnicut and Jonesy squatted tailor-fashion on a blanket, bucking heads in a two-man poker game. Jonesy was dealing and as Honnicut picked up his cards, he exploded:

"Double gardam, if I've ever seen such lousy cards. You got the double-dyed hoodoo on me tonight, Jonesy, you ornery hunk o' buzzard bait!"

On one of the bedrolls a few feet away, another outlaw stirred and grumbled: "Shut your big mouth! How can anyone sleep with all that chatter goin' on!"

Jonesy and Honnicut laughed softly, and then went on with the game. Dawson whispered to Pete Macue: "If we can silence those two, we can take the rest of the camp easy. You circle around and take care of that little hombre on the other side. I'll take the lanky one on this side. When you get within range of that firelight, the gent on this side, Honnicut, will spot you. And Jonesy, his friend, will spot me. We'll have to run for it, then, and count on surprise keeping them from giving an alarm the first few seconds. Don't shoot if you can help it. Club your man with the butt of your gun. Get going. I'll wait until you've circled around."

Then to the others, he said: "You can see the rest of the gang spread out along there on their bedrolls. Each of you pick a couple of them as your own special targets in case an alarm goes up and the big shooting starts."

They nodded and Dawson squinted through the darkness toward the firelight and tried to judge the time it would take Macue to circle around behind Jonesy. Then, crouched almost double, Dawson started edging up behind Hoss Honnicut. Both men were absorbed in their card game and didn't look

up. Dawson and Macue were both only about ten feet behind their victims when suddenly two shots blasted from the entrance to the Hole. Dawson swore at this turn of bad luck. Obviously the sentries at the entrance had just discovered the Carthage bunch outside.

With the sound of the shots, Honnicut looked up and saw Pete Macue tearing toward Jonesy. At the same instant Jonesy glanced up from his cards and saw Dawson. Dawson would never forget the look of disbelief and alarm on the face of the bandy-legged little owlhoot. His mouth gaped and his eyes looked as though they would bug out of their sockets. His mouth finally worked but no words came out. The cards slipped from his fingers and he scrabbled erect just as Pete Macue landed on his back.

At the same time Honnicut too leaped up. He wheeled around, saw Dawson before he could get to him. A hoarse yell of alarm broke from his throat. He swung wildly at Dawson, but the blow skimmed harmlessly over Dawson's head. At the same time, Dawson drove his fist with all his strength against the tall man's Adam's apple. Honnicut crumpled immediately. Dawson didn't know whether he'd killed him or not. He didn't much care, right now.

He saw that Macue's first swing of his gun butt hadn't knocked out Jonesy. The two men were locked in a death struggle, their hands gripping each other's throats. Dawson leaped toward them and uncereemoniously slammed the barrel of his .45 against the back of Jonesy's skull. At the same time, he hollered to the rest of his crowd:

"Get 'em, boys! Shoot to kill, now! We've got to thin their ranks fast if we're going to stand a chance!"

At Honnicut's first roaring yell of warning, the

whole camp had come instantly awake. Crouching, with both guns drawn, Dawson saw the Risk gang come lurching up from their bedrolls, reaching for their irons. A few fell back instantly across their bedrolls as the Carthage group cut loose with their first blast of shots. But then the outlaws had their hands on their guns and the darkness outside of the campfires' glow was penciled with vivid streaks of gunfire.

In that first exchange the Risk gang, still sleep-fogged and panicky, suffered losses. At least a half dozen spun and fell as slugs poured into them. One man came staggering across the camp clearing, glassy-eyed, toward Dawson, his .44 falling from his suddenly splayed fingers. He pitched headlong into one of the campfires, scattering lighted coals and sparks. His clothing began to smoulder and his face lay full in a bed of hot coals and the stink of burning flesh was hot and sickening in Dawson's nostrils.

The shooting continued now without letup for half a minute, like a string of Fourth of July firecrackers going off. Dawson saw two of his men fall. He hit a Risk man and then he looked around for Nick Risk and Ishmael Cobb. He finally saw them, running toward the corral, looking back over their shoulders and firing as they ran. Dawson raised his gun, but couldn't get a clear shot at either of the two ringleaders without taking a chance on shooting down one of his own men.

Then Dawson saw one of the outlaws, a big, pot-bellied man with rusty red hair and long sideburns, come running wild-eyed toward him. Half of Delamater's right cheek was torn away. His eyes were staring wildly. He held a horse pistol and was slamming shots toward Dawson. Only his stagger and the ensuing wildness of his aim saved Dawson's life.

Delamater was screaming: "It's Dawson's ghost! He's come back from the dead to get us. He—he's rounded up all the men we've ever killed and brought 'em back here to gun us down!" His voice was ragged with hysteria.

Dawson pumped two shots into Delamater and still the big man kept coming toward him. When Delamater's trigger clicked on an empty chamber, he hurled the useless weapon full toward Dawson's face. Dawson ducked just as it went whistling over his head. And then Delamater sprawled dead at his feet.

By now the whole encampment was being crisscrossed with gunfire by both sides. All was confusion. Men were milling about, some of them engaged in hand to hand fighting. As several slugs whistled past, uncomfortably close, Dawson dove for the ground. Just as he did so, he saw Nick Risk and Ishmael Cobb go tearing past the camp on horseback, toward the entrance to the Hole. Each of them was leading three other horses. Dawson raked fire from his .45's toward them, but they were fast-moving targets and both Risk and Cobb were low in the saddle. They were past the campfires and into the darkness before Dawson could even start to draw a bead on them.

Right after that, three more men on horseback sped into the campfire light. Apparently, they'd followed their leaders in a mad dash for the corral as soon as the shooting started, realizing that they'd been caught at a great disadvantage and probably figuring that the attacking party was larger than it was. Dawson blazed four shots toward the three horsemen, and somebody else must have opened up on them too, for he saw two of them tumble headlong from the saddle.

A few moments later he noticed that the sound of gunfire around him was decreasing. Then it faded to

a few scattered shots and there was silence, except for the moans of those wounded but not yet dead. Dawson called to his men and only four of the nine he had started with stepped forward. As they did so, one of the wounded outlaws, raised up and fired point-blank into the group, cursing them. One of the men from Carthage dropped without a sound as the slug caught him in the back of the head. Another whirled and shot the wounded owlhoot right through the center of the face.

Dawson said: "You Risk men, get this! All of you still alive, throw your guns out here. If there's another shot toward us, we won't be taking any prisoners. Wounded or not, we'll kill every one of you!"

Muttered curses poured from the darkness around the edge of the camp, but several guns were tossed toward the campfire near Dawson and the three men from Carthage. Dawson then picked up a piece of grease wood and thrust it into the fire to make a torch. He ordered his men to do the same thing and make a tour of the camp and see who was still living, if any of their own men could be moved and saved.

Now, from the west entrance to the Hole, there was a sustained rattling of gunfire as the men from Carthage, stationed outside, started to pick off the Risk bunch trying to ride out into the canyon proper. Shouts and cries of rage were carried back by the wind.

Dawson grinned, said. "I don't think we've got too much to worry about out there. There aren't usually more than five sentries, and counting Nick Risk and Cobb and the one hombre who got out of this mess by horseback, that's only eight of the gang left. Our men should be able to handle them, barricaded behind rocks as they are out there."

Then Dawson witnessed something that he'd never forget. It was a horrifying and yet an awesome thing. The youngster of the Risk gang was a youth about twenty years old. He was slim and very fair, with long silky yellow hair and one of those peaches-and-cream complexions that men sometimes have that make them the envy of all women. With his big blue eyes against a tangle of dark lashes, this boy, Conway, looked even younger than he was. He didn't look to be more than about sixteen. The gang had nicknamed him Baby Face. Mike Scoggins had told Dawson that when Conway first joined the bunch he'd had to fight half of them before he got any peace. Because of his slight build, he hadn't been able to whip many of the men but he put up such a good scrap for his size and refused to acknowledge defeat no matter how many times he was knocked down, that he finally won the grudging admiration of the whole gang.

Baby Face Conway had come from down around the border country. They claimed that he'd killed his first man when he was only fourteen years old. That was right after he learned that his mother earned her living in the border town dance halls. He had committed a number of small-time robberies and killed several men before he finally joined the Risk bunch.

Dawson remembered him as a quiet, moody kid who kept to himself a lot and didn't seem to have any particular friends among the gang. Now he saw Conway, writhing and twisting and rolling back and forth on the ground. The front of the boy's shirt over his belly was soaked with blood. One ear was a clump of bloody flesh. He held both hands over his face and his fingers were sticky with the crimson that flowed between them.

In an almost childlike voice Conway was crying: "My eyes, my eyes! I can't see! They shot out my eyes, I tell you! Somebody help me! It's so dark, so dark! Oh, Mother Of God, somebody help me!"

Dawson and the three men with him stood frozen, watching the tortured writhings of the youth. They listened to him sobbing: "Mother! Where are you, Mother? I—I can't see, I tell you! I'm afraid. You—you know I was always afraid of the dark, Mother! You've got to help me!"

Then, a few yards away, another one of the Risk gang, the tall and stringy man who had befriended Dawson along with Mike Scoggins, the man called Walleye, rose to his feet. His left hand clutched at a bad chest wound over the heart. His right hand held a gun. Bent almost double, staggering, he moved toward the moaning Baby Face Conway.

"Walleye said: 'It's all right, kid. It's all right. Stop crying. I'll help you.'"

Before Dawson or any of the others could move, Walleye Thompson reached the boy. He pushed his sixgun against the boy's yellow haired temple and pulled the trigger. Conway jerked sideways, dead before his head hit the ground. Then Walleye straightened and turned toward Dawson and the others.

"You lousy law-buzzards will never stretch me at the end of a rope," he spat at them. And then he pushed the sixgun into his mouth and squeezed the trigger again and blew away the top of his head.

One of the men with Dawson wheeled and bent over, violently sick to his stomach. Dawson said: "God help 'em! I just wish every youngster who's startin' to fondle a gun and thinkin' what a romantic swash-

buckling life an owlhoot leads could have witnessed that scene."

"They'd change their minds in a hurry," one of Dawson's men answered.

They made a quick round of the camp, then, and found that none of their own men was still living. One of the Risk bunch was still alive, though. He had a bad leg wound, but was able to hobble about on one leg. They helped him to the corral and after roping his wrists behind him, boosted him up onto a mount. Dawson and the others then saddled horses and rode toward the entrance to Hellions' Hole, where the rattle of gunfire had also ceased.

As they rode out into the canyon, five of the Carthage men popped out from behind their rock barricades and ran toward them. One of them reported that they got three of the gang but that the others had gotten away, among them Nick Risk and Ishmael Cobb, as best Dawson could gather by the descriptions given. One of the outside group said:

"We couldn't help it. They took us by surprise. Outside of one short exchange of shots, they didn't try to fight us. They seemed only to want to get away. We weren't expecting them to be mounted, either."

Dawson said: "Hell, except for those kingpins getting away, this would have been pretty much of a clean sweep. But that's probably the last anyone will ever see of Risk and Cobb. My office isn't going to like that, but at least we've recovered the cash. I'll ride back into the Hole and get that, now. And you hombres stop worrying about missing out on the reward money on Risk and Cobb. There's probably plenty of money on the heads of some of those others we killed. I know Mike Scoggins and Walleye

Thompson, both of 'em dead now, once told me that there was a few thousand posted on each of them in Montana."

Then Dawson rode into the Hole and found the place where he'd buried the metal box of stolen bank currency. The money was intact and, retrieving it, he rode back and joined the others. They walked to where they'd tethered their mounts and headed out of the Red Wall section.

It was mid-morning and all of them were bleary-eyed tired when they rode out of the foothills and into the prairie and rangeland section of the Basin. When they rode into sight of the Parson's homestead, Dawson said:

"Reckon a cup o' strong black java would perk you hombres up some. How about stoppin' off at the Parsons' place and seein' if they'll brew some for us."

"You sure it's coffee you're interested in, Dawson?" Pete Macue kidded. "Or the gal who's goin' to make it?"

Dawson felt color mounting in his cheeks but he didn't answer. Some of the others laughed in good-natured jeering but they all turned toward the small neat frame house of the homesteader. When they were a hundred yards away, there was the flat crack of a rifle from one of the windows of the farmhouse. Dawson heard a slug whine past his ear and turned to see Pat Montague's Stetson fly off as the bullet passed through the high crown. Instantly Dawson slipped from the saddle and flung himself flat on the ground as the sound of rifle fire slapped the morning silence once more.

"What the hell?" Pete Macue said. "Has old Ned Parsons gone loco? What's he shootin' at us for?"

Dawson said: "It don't make sense—if it is Parsons

doing the shooting." He crawled through the knee-high grass until he was able to see around the farmhouse and spot five horses tethered in the back yard. He called out:

"Don't reckon that was Parsons shooting. Got a hunch it's Nick Risk and what's left of his gang. For some reason they've stopped off here and have taken over the place. They—" He suddenly couldn't talk. His throat felt as though it was stuffed with dirty cotton, as he thought about Callie being in the hands of Risk and Big Ish Cobb and the others.

The other eight men moved cautiously through the deep grass toward Dawson. "What are we goin' to do about this, Ben?" one of them whispered.

Before Dawson could answer, another rifle shot cracked sharply. The bullet cut through the grass a few feet from where Dawson was sprawled.

"They can see where we are by the moving tops of the grass," he said. "In a few minutes they'll have the range and some of us are going to get hurt."

Montague reached toward his hip but Dawson reached out and stopped him. "We can't shoot back yet."

"Why not?"

"Old man Parsons and Callie are in that house. Risk and his boys might be using them as shields. We can't kill the Parsons."

From the house, then, carried on the wind, came the deep, deliberate voice of Ishmael Cobb. He shouted: "Dawson, can you hear me?" When Dawson didn't answer Cobb went on: "We are holding the Parsons as hostages. Nick is bad hurt and needs a doctor. Ride on into town and get one for him and bring him back. Do that and the Parsons won't be harmed. If you don't—if you try to cross us in any way, Daw-

son— Well, you won't like having what will happen to them on your souls."

The men sprawled in the grass looked at each other. Dawson felt all color washing from his face.

"What should we do, Ben?" Pet Macue asked.

Cobb shouted: "We want an answer, Dawson. And fast!" Another shot crashed out and another slug picked its way whiningly through the grass.

Then another voice came from the house. This one was soft and feminine but full of desperation. The wind barely brought it to them. It said: "Don't listen to them, Ben! Don't do what they say! Let Risk die! He can't last long anyhow, and even if you do what they say, they're going to kill us. They—"

The voice was suddenly chopped off and it took two of the men with Dawson to hold him down as he started to scramble to his feet.

"Don't be a loco fool," Montague told him. "There's all open ground around the house. They'd pick you off easy. And they're not going to kill the girl. They can't. Without her and old man Parsons as hostages, they wouldn't have a chance. Obviously, Nick Risk is too badly injured to ride any farther or they wouldn't have stopped off here."

Slowly Dawson calmed down. Then they heard Ish Cobb call out: "What's the answer, Dawson?"

"All right," Dawson shouted back. "Hold your fire. We'll do as you say."

Slowly, then, they all eased to their feet. They ran toward their horses and forked into the saddle. There were no more shots from the farmhouse but they rode away from that section of the range at full tilt.

Chapter Eight

IT WAS after all the early morning chores were done and Callie and Ned Parsons had just sat down to relax for a few minutes over a late cup of coffee. For the second time, Callie had told her father of the events of the night before. The old nester was humbled by his own misproven lack of faith in Dawson and at the same time proud of his daughter's loyalty and her part in ferreting out the truth.

Callie was trying to keep control of herself and not think about what had happened after she last saw Ben Dawson last night. She kept telling herself that everything was all right and any minute now she'd hear a rider approaching and it would be Ben and he'd be smiling and telling her that it was all over.

She had just drained the last of the coffee when a rumble of hooves was heard approaching across the open rangeland. She listened tensely for a moment, to make sure the sound was actually coming toward the homestead, and then she abandoned all pretense and got up from the table so fast her chair tumbled over backward. With a little squeal of pleasure, she said: "Oh, Papa, it's Ben. It's all over and he's come back!"

Her face was flushed as she raced to the front door.

She shielded her eyes against the bright morning sun, strained her vision toward the small group of riders moving toward the farm.

There was something about the way they rode, though, that stirred faint feelings of alarm in Callie. Three of the riders were unnaturally bunched together. As they drew closer, she saw that the one in the middle was slumped in the saddle and swayed and slipped from side to side. Callie's heart sank. She knew then, she was sure, that they were bringing Ben to her but that he was hurt, badly hurt.

Her pulse hammering, she ran across the yard toward the approaching riders. And then she saw the thick, long wavy yellow hair of the man slumped in the saddle between the other two and gladness leaped within her as she saw that it wasn't Ben Dawson.

The five riders eased up to her and stopped. In her thankfulness that the hurt man wasn't Ben, Callie Parsons was bursting to help whoever it was that was in trouble. Her round and pretty face full of concern, she said: "This is the Parsons homestead and we'll be glad to do what we can for you. If you carry him up to the house, we'll make him comfortable until you can get a doctor to come out from town."

"Wal, now," one of the riders drawled. "That's right nice of you, honey." He was a small, gaunt-looking man, with a rabbitty face, stained dark along the thin jawline with beard stubble. His clothes were stiff-dirty and the sleeve of one shirt had a ragged hole in it, with the rust-colored stain of dried blood all around it. His deeply sunken eyes moved appraisingly over Callie's sturdy figure and something about the way he looked at her sent a chill through her.

It was then that she took a second, closer look at the man slumped in the saddle. He raised his head

weakly and looked at her dazedly and then dropped his chin again. She had never seen the infamous Nick Risk before but she had heard him described enough times to recognize him now. She held back a little cry of surprise. And then, noting the one who towered over the others, the one with the bald head and brass earrings and fierce beetling brows, she knew this was the dread Ishmael Cobb, who some said was even worse than Nick Risk.

Cobb said in a deep, solemn voice: "Who's in the house beside yourself, Miss?"

"Why, why, nobody," Callie said, nervously. "I mean—that is—nobody except my father."

"Is he armed?"

Callie felt panic building in her. But somehow she held control of herself. "He has a rifle and a couple of pistols," she said. "Just like everybody else in this country."

Cobb looked knowingly toward the swarthy, scrawny little man, and then he motioned with his head toward Callie. The little man heeled his mount and edged it toward her. She knew what was going to happen then. With a little cry, she wheeled and started toward the house, crying out to her father. Instantly Murchison, the little man, was after her. His horse pounded alongside of her. Callie tried to beat at him with her fists, fight him off as she ran, but he reached down and seized both her hands.

He was surprisingly strong for a man of such small stature. He hauled her off her feet and swung her up over the saddle in front of him with seeming ease. He held her cradled in his arms, despite her kicking and squirming, one of his hands holding both her wrists so she couldn't scratch him.

"Regular squallin' little hellcat, ain't you?" Murchison said. "Nice little armful, you are, though."

Callie looked at his tobacco-stained teeth and smelled his fetid breath and turned away, sobbing. Then she heard her father shout from the doorway of the house: "What's goin' on here? What are you doin' to my daughter?"

Ish Cobb answered: "Don't get excited, nester. Put that rifle down if you don't want your daughter hurt."

For a moment, Ned Parsons hesitated. Then he saw Murchison whip out a sixgun and place it against Callie's temple. He dropped the rifle and went pale as he recognized the riders. They pulled up to the house and dismounted. Murchison set Callie down but he was right behind her, his drawn gun in her back.

As gently as possible, Cobb and another outlaw eased the wounded Nick Risk from the saddle while he alternately cursed them and cried out with sharp gasps of pain. Risk's fancy silk shirt was a blood-stained mess. One of his arms hung loose and twisted. Another great blotch of blood discolored his faun-colored whipcord breeches. Some of it was splattered on his hand-tooled boots. He sagged limply between Cobb and the other man as they carried him toward the house.

"Don't try to leave and don't attempt to interfere," Cobb told Parsons. "If you do, Murchison will blow a hole in your daughter's spine. Don't think it would bother him one whit to do that."

Parsons shook his head dazedly. He looked at Callie and the grinning, dark-bearded little owlhoot behind her. As they moved past him, Callie said. "Don't be frightened, Papa. They won't hurt us if we do as

they say. I—I'm just thankful it isn't Ben who was hurt."

Cobb and the other man were just setting Risk down on a large sofa when she said that. Cobb turned, his dark face showing no emotion. "By Ben, do you mean Dawson?"

"Why, yes," Callie admitted.

Cobb's eyes narrowed. "I take it, you're a—a personal friend of his?"

Callie Parsons was instantly wary. "Well, he's—more just an acquaintance," she said quickly.

"I see," Cobb said. He smiled but it was not a pleasant thing to see. "If that's the way it is, I have a notion that he'll be dropping by here. That is, if he's still alive. And that will be fine. Just fine."

Cobb swung his eyes toward Murchison. "Take her outside and make her fetch some water."

"Sure thing," Murchison answered, grinning, his eyes moving over Callie.

"And leave her alone," Cobb added. "We've no time now for messin' with women. Not until we get Nick fixed up a little. You understand?"

Murchison paused, his face falling. "But, Ish, she's—"

"You heard what I said."

The little man shrugged and gestured with his gun for Callie to go out the back door ahead of him. They returned in a few minutes with Callie lugging a big bucket of well water. She set it down by the couch, where Cobb had now stripped off Nick Risk's shirt and cut away part of his trousers with his big knife. Risk was lying perfectly still and limp, his handsome young face milky pale, his eyes staring up at the ceiling, unblinking.

Cobb then ordered Callie to get some kind of cloth

to use as bandages and any medicines or ointments they had in the house. She returned with an old but clean petticoat, which she tore up into strips and handed to Cobb. To one side, Ned Parsons leaned against a wall, under the watchful eyes and poised guns of the other two outlaws.

With a sort of horrified fascination, Callie watched Ish Cobb's big, jeweled hands soak a wadding of bandage with water and wipe the blood away from the dark and swollen wounds in Risk's shoulder, upper arm and right thigh. The tatooed pictures of oriental goddesses writhed and rippled across the muscles and tendons of Cob's forearms as he worked. As he cleaned around the wounds, Risk winced and stifled a groan several times, but that was his only reaction. Then he said, weakly:

"How does it look, Ish? You think I'll make it?"

"You've got to make it, Nick. You hold on tight while I probe the lead out of those holes. The shoulder and arm wounds don't look too bad. But the leg one . . ." His voice trailed off and he shook his head, gently.

Then Cobb picked up his knife, took a stove match from his pocket, scratched it alight and ran the small flame along the edge of the knife blade and its needle-sharp point. While he did this, Nick Risk sucked in a harsh breath and turned his head toward the wall.

"Try not to move more'n you can help," Cobb said. "Stuff your fist into your mouth and bite it all you want but try not to squirm too much."

Then gently, but with sureness, Cobb spread the hole in Risk's shoulders between the thumb and forefinger of his left hand. Blood welled out. Quickly he inserted the point of the knife in the hole and began to probe. Nick Risk stiffened all over and the sound

of his moans pushed past the fist he'd stuffed into his mouth. In a matter of seconds, though, the tip of Cobb's knife flipped out a small dark chunk of red-stained lead. Then he took a jar of whiskey that Callie had brought to him and poured some into the wound. The fist flew away from Risk's mouth and he screamed once and then went limp.

"That's better," Cobb said softly. Swiftly, then, he went to work on the wound in Risk's forearm.

In spite of herself, Callie had to admire the gentleness and the sureness of Cobb's big hands. She found herself thinking that here might have been a man who could have been a great surgeon if fate hadn't somewhere along the line detoured him down the owlhoot trail. And she wondered at such faith and loyalty and affection between two men who otherwise would think nothing of killing or betraying their own mother for a few dollars.

Cobb got the second slug out of Risk and was just starting on the leg wound when Risk came jarring out of his faint. He tried to sit up but Ish Cobb gently pushed him back down.

"Easy, Nick, it's almost all over," the big man said. "Just a few minutes more. Get a grip on yourself."

Risk lay back, his breathing ragged, his head moving from side to side on the bed. Then Cobb sunk the knife tip into the swollen wound on the thigh and Nick Risk came erect cursing and screaming.

"Blast you, Ish," he shouted shrilly. "Leave me alone! I—I'll kill you if you touch me there again!"

Ish Cobb yanked his knife away from the wound. He drew in a slow sigh. Suddenly his fist balled and lashed out in a short straight punch that didn't travel more than twelve inches. It caught Nick Risk flush on the point of the jaw and he collapsed backward onto

the bed, out cold. Instantly Cobb started to work again on the wounded leg. It took him considerably longer before he finally probed the slug out of this wound. As he sluiced whiskey into the hole, he said sadly:

"I don't like the looks of that one—the way its streaked all discolored up and down the leg. Even if he lives through this, he'll probably lose that leg, poor devil."

Then Cobb quickly and gently applied salve and bandaged the wounds and covered Risk with a blanket. When he turned to the others, his olive-hued face was sheened with sweat. To the men who had ridden in with him he said:

"What are you all standin' around gawkin' for? Couple of you get to the windows and watch to make sure nobody else comes to this place. The second you spot any rider approaching, let me know."

He turned to Callie and her father. "You two—get out in the kitchen and work us up some grub. And get in a couple more pails of fresh water for Nick."

Callie went out into the back yard alone this time, after being warned by Cobb that if she tried to run away or to double-cross them in any way, her father would be killed. She realized there was nothing to be done. By the looks of those wounds, she knew it would be days, maybe weeks, before Nick Risk could be moved. And in the meanwhile, if anyone tried to come near the place, there would be trouble.

Back in the house she was kept busy cooking breakfast for the five outlaws, who took turns eating while the rest of them watched from the windows. After the men had finished eating, Ish Cobb called Murchison back into the kitchen to watch Callie and her father while he went in to take a look at Nick Risk.

She heard Cobb and Risk talking and knew that Risk had regained consciousness. His voice sounded a little stronger now. But then Callie forgot about Risk and Cobb as a sweaty hand grabbed her by the wrist and spun her around. The man named Murchison put his arm about her waist and at the same time jammed the barrel of his gun into her ribs.

As Callie tried to arch away from him, Murchison, grinning slyly, whispered: "Don't try to fight me or I'll kill you right here and now. It'll be easy. I'll just tell Big Ish you tried to get away and I had to do it. Understand?"

Callie didn't answer. She felt her heart thundering against her ribs. Murchison's grip about her waist tightened roughly. From the corner where he stood, Ned Parsons said: "Leave her alone, you dirty scum."

Over Callie's shoulder, Murchison said: "Shut up, you fool old nester. What harm's it going to do the gal to give a man a kiss? You try to interfere and she'll die fast."

He turned his attention to Callie once more, vainly tried to capture her mouth with his as she twisted and turned her head desperately from side to side. Finally, she felt herself being flung away as a deep voice boomed:

"Murchison, leave that woman alone or I'll pistol-whip that skinny little face of yours into pulp. We haven't got time for that sort of thing. Get back to one of the windows."

Big Ishmael Cobb stood in the doorway of the kitchen' his slanting yellow eyes pinned piercingly on Murchison. The little owlhoot's lips grew bitter. He smeared the back of his hand across his mouth, sneered: "What you really mean is you're savin' her for yourself, isn't that it, Ish? I've heard about you."

Cobb's glance swung toward Callie. A wisp of a smile flicked at the corners of his mouth. "It's true that I have a great admiration for golden-haired women," he said. "But that's no business of yours, Murchison. Perhaps if a pistol butt knocked out what's left of your rotting teeth, you wouldn't be so mouthy."

All the time he spoke, Cobb's glittering yellow orbs never left Callie. She knew right then that unless some unexpected help came in the next few hours she'd never leave this house alive. She knew that she'd let them kill her before she'd let the big man even so much as touch her.

Murchison slithered past Cobb and into the front room. Cobb gestured to Parsons and his daughter to follow. In there, he sat them down in two chairs against the wall where he could see them, while he sat and talked with Nick Risk. Risk looked better now, Callie saw. His eyes were bright and there were spots of color high on his cheeks. His voice sounded stronger.

One of the men stationed at a window began to sing, high and off key, some bawdy ballad. His ugly, wrinkled face was flushed and he'd obviously been sampling the remainder of the gallon jug of white whiskey that Cobb had used on Risk's wounds. After a while he began to tell the others about the time he drove a stage, back in the Seventies on the famous run between Cheyenne and Deadwood.

"Yessireebob, I hauled the best of 'em on that run," the old outlaw reminisced. "The famous ones used to insist on ridin' in the seat of honor, right up there on the box, beside me. On a long ride like that you got to know folks purty well. I've had people like Wild Bill Hickok and Buffalo Bill, Calamity Jane,

Jack Langrishe and his theatrical troupers. Lot o' famous ones used to make that run with me."

"Henshaw, you know you're lyin'. You never met all those folks." Murchison said. "Every time you get a few slugs of mountain mule juice in you, you get to talkin' big."

"Leave him alone," Cobb ordered. "Let him talk. It'll keep us all from gettin' bored to death." He reached down and picked up the half empty gallon jug of whiskey. "Here, Henshaw, if you're goin' into a talking spell, you might as well grease your tonsils a little more. But don't gulp it all down. I may have to rinse out Nick's wounds again later."

Old Henshaw came over and with his wrinkled face wreathed in a grin, ducked his head and lifted the big jar to his mouth. Some of the whiskey trickled from the corners of his mouth and down his bristly, receding chin. He smeared it off and went back to his post at the window.

"Didn't know any o' those folks, eh, Murchison. Well, I reckon I can prove it. You all heard o' this here little ol' gal they call Calamity Jane, but I'll bet some o' you don't even know her right handle was Martha Canary. Once she told me how come they nicknamed her that."

Henshaw told them then how during the Bib Horn campaign of 1872, at Goose Creek, Wyoming, they were ordered out to put down an Indian uprising. They were out for several days and engaged in several skirmishes in which half a dozen or more soldiers were either killed or mortally wounded. While returning to the post, they were ambushed. Captain Egan, their commanding officer, was shot. Martha Canary, at the moment, was riding in advance and when she heard the shooting, she turned and saw the

captain reeling from his saddle, ready to topple off.

She whipped her own mount around and galloped back in time to catch the wounded officer as he was falling, and to drag him up onto her own horse in front of her. After that she made a successful run for it to the fort. Later, after the captain's wounds were healed, he told her: "From now on, you're going to be called Calamity Jane, heroine of the plains."

Henshaw was just finishing his tale when one of the other men at the window shouted: "Group of riders approaching from the east."

Ishmael Cobb grabbed the rifle he'd taken from Ned Parsons and hurried toward the window. He peered out at the small group of riders moving through the tall grass toward the house. He said: "It's Dawson and some of the others. There's seven or eight of them."

"What are we going to do, Ish?" Murchison said fearfully.

"They won't give us any trouble," Cobb answered. "This house stands right out in the open. As long as our ammo holds out, we can keep them off. At least we won't have to worry about Dawson and his bunch, once they find out we've got the girl and her father prisoners. We might even be able to use 'em. I'd like to get a sawbones out here to tend to Nick's leg. Looks like it's getting infected badly."

Then Cobb raised the rifle to his shoulder and squeezed the trigger. The slam of the shot was loud in the room. He fired several more times and kept the group inside the house posted on the movements of the Dawson group. Then there was an exchange of words between Cobb and Dawson and finally Cobb turned away from the window, set the rifle down.

"They're gone," he said. "I think they'll do what I

told them to. We'll know in a couple of hours. It shouldn't take them longer than that to ride into Carthage and back."

When Cobb had announced that one of the riders outside was Ben Dawson, Callie Parsons felt joy and hope stir within her. At least Dawson was still alive. At first she'd had hopes that in some way he'd be able to rescue her and her father. But now as Cobb announced that Dawson and the others had ridden away, her hope faded. She slumped disconsolately in her chair and put her face into her hands.

After a while she felt a heavy hand on her shoulders and Ishmael Cobb said: "Don't cry. I can't hardly stand to hear a woman cry."

Callie Parsons roughly knocked his hand from her shoulder and leaped to her feet. "Leave me alone!" she cried. "Don't *touch* me, you beast. I don't need your sympathy!"

A red tide crept up from Cobb's thick neck, discolored his whole face. "You'll be sorry for that," he said, so quietly Callie could hardly hear him. "No woman talks that way to Ishmael Cobb."

He turned away then and strode toward one of the vacant windows, to watch from that side of the house, after handing Nick Risk a gun and telling him to keep an eye on the girl and her father. Now they commanded a view of the approaches to the house from all four sides and there was no possible way for anyone to slip up on them by surprise.

It was a couple of hours later that Henshaw said, thickly: "Lone rider heading this way, Ish. He's wavin' a white rag and carryin' some sort of bundle under his other arm."

"You get over here and let me take that window," Cobb ordered and the two men changed places. Cobb

waited until the rider was less than a hundred yards off and then fired a warning shot over his head, ordered him to stand. The rider shouted back and the wind blew his words clearly to those within the house.

"Couldn't get the doc to come out here," he hollered. "He was afraid you'd hold him hostage, too. But he packed up a bundle of dressings and medicine and a note of instructions how to take care of bullet wounds. That was the best we could do."

Cobb swore. "A hell of a lot of good that is. That leg of Nick's needs more than amateur patchwork at this stage."

The rider outside then shouted: "Dawson says that as long as you don't harm the Parsons, nobody will try to run you out of there. We'll stay away until Risk can ride again. But only if you don't hurt the Parsons. We'll check on that every few hours and you'll have to bring 'em both to the windows and let 'em tell us they're all right. Any time you can't do that, we attack immediately."

Cobb called to Callie and Ned Parsons. "Get over here and tell 'em you're all right. I ain't worried about them trying to attack the house. We can mow 'em down like sitting ducks but there's no use wasting a lead."

At gunpoint he forced old Ned Parsons and his daughter to the window. They both shouted to the lone rider outside that they were all right so far. Then Cobb ordered him to throw the bundle of medicines up into the front yard and then ride off, fast.

The rider did that and a few minutes later, Cobb ordered one of the men to go out into the yard and pick up the package. When he brought it inside, Cobb opened it and said: "Maybe this stuff will help.

He's got instructions what to do to fight infection and even how to amputate, if necessary. Maybe everything'll be all right, Nick."

Callie Parsons listened to this and knew she would probably be holedup here with the outlaws for several days at least. The idea of that sickened her. She dreaded the coming of night. She knew that somehow, no matter how desperate a move it involved, she and her father had to make a break from here.

Later that afternoon, another rider approached to check on the welfare of the Parsons. Callie then figured that it would be about dinner time when the next checkup would be made. A plan of action began to evolve in her mind.

For dinner that night, Callie put on a huge pot of homemade soup and brought it to a boil over the big wood-burning cast-iron stove. She kept stalling and holding off serving of the soup until she heard the guard at the window announce a rider approaching. Callie then managed to catch her father's eye and tried to signal to him to be ready for action.

Cobb, sitting at the table with Murchison and the fifth man, named Granger, told Callie and her father to get to the window and reassure the rider outside that they were still all right.

"And tell them not to make these checks so close together. Tell 'em once every eight hours is enough. We don't like being disturbed so much."

And then Callie knew she couldn't let this opportunity slip by. There wouldn't be another such chance until morning. She knew she couldn't spend the night here with this owlhoot bunch in the house.

"Just a minute," she said, lifting the big cauldron of boiling soup from the stove. "Let me serve you

some of this so you can be eating while I go to the window."

She saw that the men had set sixguns on the table beside their plates. Now, Callie Parsons, holding the huge pot of scalding soup with a couple of well padded homemade pot holders, seized it by the bottom with one hand and swung and tipped the pot, sending the steaming greasy liquid spraying over the three men at the table. They screamed in fearful agony as the steaming, boiling hot liquid scalded their faces and chests and arms. Only Cobb managed to throw an arm up before his face and protect it somewhat from the scalding deluge.

At the same time Callie scooped up one of the sixguns from the table. She whirled and shot the stupefied Henshaw on guard at the window, in the arm, causing him to drop the rifle before he could raise it for a shot.

"Run, Papa!" she cried. "Out the front door. This is our big chance."

The old man came flying from his chair as the men at the table pawed crazily at their scalded flesh and screamed oaths that would have shamed a muleskinner. When old man Henshaw tried to stop Callie, old Ned Parsons jolted him back out of the way with a smashing blow. Then Callie got the door open and the two of them were running across the front yard, through the fast falling dusk.

They were halfway to the rider a couple of hundred yards from the house when a rifle cracked behind them. Callie turned and still staggering forward in a stumbling run, returned the fire with the sixgun she still carried. The rifle cracked again and a cry sprang from the lips of Ned Parsons. Callie saw his legs buckle and he pitched forward to the ground. She

stopped and started back toward him. He raised his face from the dirt and said, weakly:

"Don't come back, Callie! Keep going. I—I'm done for. If you stop, they'll get you too. There's nothing you can do for me."

She paid no attention. She turned and crouched low, hurried back to the side of her father. She turned him over. His eyes were wide and staring and blood trickled from the corners of his gaping mouth. She knew he was dead but she couldn't make herself believe it. She shook him furiously: "Wake up, Papa," she begged. "You've got to! Wake up!"

Now lead was flying furiously about her. Up ahead, the rider was bawling to her to hurry. One of the bullets thudded into old Ned Parsons's back as Callie kneeled beside him, tears streaking down her cheeks. He showed no reaction. She knew then that he had been right. She had to go on. She forced herself up and started once more in a stumbling run toward the rider. Twice more, the rifle cracked from the doorway of the house, behind her

Chapter Nine

WHEN BEN DAWSON and the others had returned to Carthage, they'd conferred with other men in the town. Some of Ned Parsons' personal friends were called into the conference and it was finally

decided that there was nothing to do but to go along with Risk and Cobb's demands.

Vic Hennis, who ran the food store and did a lot of trading with Ned Parsons said: "Way that house is situated, right out in the open in the middle of all that flat land, so long as they can protect all four sides of it, ain't no way in the world of rootin' 'em out of there. Not until their ammunition is used up, anyway. They'd slaughter any attacking party."

"And think nothin' of murderin' the Parsons in cold blood," another merchant put in. "If we attacked they'd have to do that, to make sure they weren't menaced from within while they were busy shooin' off an attack."

Ben Dawson was silent all through the discussion. He kept trying not to think what it must be like for Callie, to be a prisoner of that group. He hoped she wouldn't be too defiant or foolishly try to escape. After a while, he said:

"Reckin it's settled, then. We have to go along with them. For a while, anyhow. Maybe after nightfall we might try a move. At least a couple of them will have to take turns sleeping. If we get a real black, moonless night, I might try slipping up on the house. But in the meantime, we'd better do as they said. Let's go get Doc Barnes. Maybe we might even cook up some plan where he can slip some kind of pills to them to knock 'em all out or something."

Doc Barnes was a wispy little owl-eyed man with a white goatee. He was a good physician and surgeon in between week-long drinking sprees. He listened blinkingly to the story and then said: "You know what'll happen if I go out there? They'll keep me there to continue treating Risk until he's either well again—or dies. And if a man's bad shotup, there's always a

better than average chance of infection. Can you figger what'd happen to me if Risk should die—or mebbe have to lose a leg or an arm? You know how that big gorilla Ish Cobb feels about Risk. If anything should happen to Risk, Cobb might go haywire and hold me responsible." The little man shuddered. "God knows what that giant would do to me in a case like that."

"You mean you won't go?" Dawson said unbelievably.

"Sorry," the doc said. "I feel sorry for the Parsons. But even if I don't go, like you say, those outlaws need 'em for protection against an attack and won't hurt 'em, anyhow. I'd just be riskin' my neck to save the life of that no-good bandit leader. I just ain't goin' to do it."

They pleaded with him, but the little old medico remained adamant. Finally, though, they got him to package up some medical supplies and write a note of emergency instructions. With that, Dawson and a group of the others, now about thirty all told, rode out toward the Parsons' place. One man was then sent in with the package and the instructions about checking up on the well-being of the Parsons.

About two miles from the homestead, at the soddy hut of a poorly nester, Dawson and the rest set up a camp to wait out the course of events. As the weary day wore on, Dawson hoped that the night would be dark, with the moon blanketed by clouds, so he could make some attempt to get to Callie and her father.

It was just about nightfall when they saw the man who had gone to make the third checkup ride toward them across the rise of ground that obscured the Parson place. As he drew closer, Dawson saw that he

was carrying some bulky object across the saddle. And when he was within hearing distance, he shouted: "Come here, Ben and help me. Hurry!"

Dawson ran toward him and in the gathering dusk he saw that what he carried across the front of his saddle was the limp figure of a woman. Dawson saw the streaming golden hair and then he saw the great dark red stain in the back of the woman's dress.

"Callie!"

The name burst from his lips as he reached up and gently lifted her down from the saddle. He held her cradled in his arms and she lay there, limply, her face deathly white. Her breathing was ragged and uneven. She was unconscious.

Dawson turned to the rider. "What happened?"

"She and the old man made a break from the house as I rode into sight. Then somebody started shooting from the doorway. At first I thought they were going to be loco lucky and make it. But then they dropped the old man. She stopped and went back to help him. I guess he was beyond help, though, because in a few minutes she started running toward me again. And then several seconds after the last shot was fired, just as she was a few yards away from me, she stumbled and fell. She was unconscious when I got to her. They pegged some shots at me, while I was hoisting her up onto the saddle, but the range was too far, then. It's a rotten shame. Another few seconds and she'd have been safe."

Dawson only partly heard what the rider had said. He stood there, with his legs apart, feeling a terrible numbness taking hold of him. He kept looking down into Callie's white face, waiting for her eyes to open, waiting for her to look up at him and recognize him and smile at him. But that didn't happen. He had

carried her all the way back to the group of men gathered about a campfire without realizing it. Some of them spoke to him but he didn't seem to hear them. One of them tried to help him as he started to set Callie down on a blanket that had been spread out.

He said, harshly: "Leave her alone, please. I'll take care of her."

But he wasn't able to do that. When he had set her down on the blanket and kneeled beside her and took hold of her hands, they were already chilled. Fearfully, he placed his ear against the softness of her breast. There wasn't even the faintest murmur of a heartbeat. He took her wrist between his hands and chafed it furiously. Through his mind leaped all the plans that he'd had for himself and Callie. She couldn't be dead. He wouldn't accept that. He wouldn't let it happen. But when after a long while she still didn't stir, even after whiskey was poured down her throat, Dawson gave up.

He stood up and shook away the comforting hands that reached out to help him. He half staggered away from the campfire and into the darkness of a small copse of elders. He found an old log and sat upon it, with his head in his hands for a long time. When he looked up again, through an open space in the canopy of leaves over him, he saw that a full moon was shining brightly out of a sky littered with twinkling stars.

He said, half aloud: "No chance of sneaking up on them tonight. Not with that moon. But I'm going after them, anyhow. I can't let them live, now that they've killed Callie. Not even one of them."

He got up stiffly from the log and with the careful, deliberate steps of a sleepwalker, walked back toward the campfire. He found that they'd already carried Callie's corpse back into town. Dawson drew his .45's

and checked and oiled them. Then he turned to the group of solemn-faced men sitting around the campfire. He said:

"I'm going up to the Parsons place. I'm going alone or I'll be glad to have company. It doesn't much matter to me. But if some of you would like a few shots at those stinkin' killers, you're welcome to come along."

There was a buzz of conversation around the campfire. There was heavy argument about the possibility of any success in attacking the farmhouse. Finally, half a dozen of the younger men from town, a few of them ones who'd been with Dawson at Hellions' Hole, stood up and moved over to his side. One of them said grimly:

"Reckon we ought to start what we finish. Might as well have another try at it. We'll go with you, Ben."

Dawson nodded his appreciation and ignored some of the remarks of the others about a suicidal mission. He and his group saddled up and rode off toward the Parsons place. Just before they left, Dawson said:

"Some of you others ride back to Carthage and hunt up a few sticks of dynamite. If this first attack doesn't work, I've got an idea that might."

Without further elaboration, he rode off with the others. Half a mile from the homestead, they dismounted and began crawling through the deep grass. The moon was high overhead now and bathing the farmhouse and the surrounding land in a yellow light almost as bright as day. The soft night air was filled with the scent of saxifrage, sourdock and fireweed, wafting in from the prairie. Overhead, a blue-winged teal swooped and darted and called to the men hidden in the deep grass. On either side of them, when

the men paused to rest, could be heard the rustle of night creatures, ground squirrels and grasshopper mice.

Just before they reached the thinning grass around the edge of the farmyard, Dawson whispered to the others. "I'm surprised we got this far without them spotting the grass waving in the moonlight. Maybe we're in luck and whoever's watching from the windows has dozed off. There's no light shining from the house, but even if they were all awake, there wouldn't be. It would make anybody at the windows too good a target. It's only about twenty-five yards from the edge of the grass to the house. If we make a fast dash, there's a chance some of us might make it."

"All right," one of the men said. "Let's say a few of us do make it to the shadows around the base of the house. What then? We don't even know how many of them are in there."

"Can't be more than four or five," Dawson said.

He rose on one elbow and looked across the moon-dappled yard. In that darkly bulking house were the men who had killed Callie Parsons. In the yard Dawson saw a dark shape that he knew must be the old man's corpse, still right there where he had fallen, shot in the back by outlaw guns.

Dawson said: "I'm going to try for it. If they shoot at me, you'll see their gun flashes. That'll give you a target. Maybe you can wing a couple of them."

One of the others put his hand on Dawson's arm. He whispered: "Wait, Ben. I'll try for it with you. My sister was one of the women the Risk bunch once kidnaped from her ranchhouse. Any of the rest of you coming with me?"

One by one, then, the others sheepishly agreed to go along. At a signal from Dawson they all suddenly

stood up and as silently as possible raced out of the grass and across the yard toward the house. They were halfway there before a rifle shot slapped out, just as they were running through a patch of bright moonlight.

Jessup, the man on Dawson's right, stumbled, clutched at his chest and fell without a word. Dawson said: "Keep going! That was a lucky shot!"

The rifle barked twice more and then was joined by the sharper sound of a sixgun. Another one of Dawson's group fell. The next instant a lit oil lamp came hurtling out from a window and crashed into pieces in the farmyard. A big patch of spilled oil caught flame and threw a bright glare over half of that section of the yard. For a moment it blinded Dawson and the others and they flung their arms over their eyes.

"God!" Dawson cried. "We're lit up like actors on a stage. We can't make it now. Turn around and head back for the grass!"

They wheeled and staggered in a zigzag run back the way they had come, the glow from the burning oil throwing flickering highlights over their grimly taut faces. Guns hammered from the house behind them but apparently, the sudden glare in the yard had hampered the vision of the men back there, too. The first two shots screamed wildly over Dawson's head. The third one struck the man running in front and to one side of Dawson. He made a strained, gasping noise and plunged to his face. But Dawson and the other two men finally reached the cover of the grass and flung themselves into it and wriggled away before any more shots could take their toll. The last echo of the gunfire faded across the flat land, as Daw-

son and his two comrades crawled farther out of range.

They reached their horses, a still shaken and disappointed group. "That won't work for sure now," Dawson said gloomily. "They'll keep alert for the rest of the night. I'm sorry to have dragged the rest of you into it, but I had to try it. There *was* a chance it might have worked if our luck had been good."

"Sure, Ben," one of them said. "It damned near did. Another few yards . . ." His voice trailed off. "What now?"

"Wait'll we get back to the camp and see if they were able to get any dynamite and then we'll see."

They rode back to the soddy shack of one of the men, where the others were gathered about the campfire. Dawson saw their eyes counting. He said: "Yeah, the rest of you were right. They got three of us. But we almost made it. Could you get any explosives?"

Ballantine, Carthage's big, heavy-muscle blacksmith, picked up a rolled package of six dynamite sticks. "Reedy, the gunsmith had 'em, left over from back when there was a lot of stump blasting goin' on in this section. Said he didn't know whether or not they were any good any more, but you was welcome to them."

Dawson nodded. "I've got an idea. I remembered something told me by a friend of mine who took part in the Johnson County Cattle War, last year. Any of you hear about that?"

"Yeah," a man called Williamson said, blowing out his bushy mustache. "I was in it myself. I was one of the hundred deputies sworn in by Sheriff Red Angus. Old Bob Foote, in Buffalo, opened his store and supplied us with free guns, ammo and tobacco. But them

dam' Regulators, bunch o' imported gunmen from Texas, Idaho and Colorado, never reached town. They heard we were ready for 'em and they retreated to the T. A. Ranch about fifteen miles south of town. When we heard that, we went after 'em. Those cowmen were in such an all-fired hurry to get behind breastworks and into rifle pits that they lost half o' their supply wagons to us. They was four hundred of us by then, heavily armed, too. After dark we dug our own rifle pits within gunshot range and then we rigged up a kind of rolling barricade of logs, mounted on the running gear of some of the captured wagons."

As the oldtimer paused for breath, Dawson grinned and said: "That's exactly what I had in mind. Why can't we rig up a 'go-devil' like the one you used to storm the Regulators?"

"Now why didn't I think of that?" Williamson exploded. "We got the dynamite. Hurley who owns this soddy has a big pile of logs out behind the place. We can lash a pile of 'em together, mount them onto the front of a wagon and push up close enough to throw dynamite into the place and blow Risk and the others cloud-high."

"What about the house?" someone said. "You'll destroy the house."

"Even if we do, it won't matter much with both Callie and her father dead," said Dawson. "Let's get busy, riggin' up that go-devil."

They stripped the body from one of Hurley's farm wagons to make it lighter and then lashed onto it a double stack of logs about ten feet square. While they worked one of the men chuckled excitedly and said: "A dozen of us will be well-shielded behind this thing. Those Risk boys are in for a surprise. Even if the dynamite doesn't go off, or even if it doesn't

blast 'em out of there, we'll still be able to push close enough with this thing to storm into the house and shoot 'em out of there."

In another hour the cumbersome but sturdy-looking vehicle was completed. Dawson and ten of the others got behind it and put their shoulders to it and began to roll it across the land toward the Parson place. It was slow going and twice the vehicle got bogged down in marshy, sandy spots, but about two hours later they were rolling it fairly easily through the deep grass, down the slightly slanting grade toward the Parson homestead.

A hundred yards from the house, the men inside opened fire. Dawson and the others behind the go-devil had made no attempt to be quiet. They were shouting and whooping with excitement as the first shots thundered from the windows of the besieged house. The bullets thudded dully into the wall of logs lashed to the front of the vehicle. Some of the Dawson group poked rifles and sixguns around the edges and over the top of the log barricade and fired back at the gunflashes blazing from the window. But there was little cessation of the gunfire from the house so obviously the shooting of the attackers was doing small damage, if any.

As the go-devil rolled into the farmyard, Dawson shouted: "We're close enough now! Give me a couple of those dynamite sticks!"

A moment later he hurled one stick after the other toward the house. He aimed them both at a window from which orange flashes of gunflame were lancing. One of the dynamite sticks hit the side of the house without doing any damage. But the second one crashed through the window. Instantly there was a slightly muffled boom of sound like a single peal of

thunder over the mountains. Then there was a blinding flash of flame and that side of the house came billowing outward, tumbling slowly, lazily, in front of a cloud of rolling black smoke.

Chapter Ten

FOR A MOMENT after the thunderous din of the explosion had faded, a pall of aching silence hung over the section. Then somewhere inside the house a ceiling beam fell and a man let out a low, whining animal-like cry. The men crouching behind the mobile log barricade stood in stunned silence, the faces of some of them bleeding from where they'd been struck by flying debris. One of the group said:

"Hell-fire, no one could live through that!" His voice sounded blunted and strange. "That place is one big funeral box now."

"Or a funeral pyre," another put in as the crackle of flames was suddenly heard from inside the house and orange tongues of fire began to lick out into the night.

"We can't be sure until we investigate," Dawson said. "That Nick Risk has more lives than a cat. Come on. Let's take a look-see before the whole building is in flames."

They moved out from behind the barricade, Dawson and three other men, and advanced cautiously

toward the door, which now hung from one hinge. They pushed inside, into the big front room. A sound from the left attracted their attention to the couch where Nick Risk was still sprawled on his back. Only now he was knocked half off the bed and was twisted around. His head hung loosely on his shoulders. His face and his long, yellow hair, now hanging down over his forehead and cheeks in disheveled hanks, was blackened from the explosion. But his eyes still shone from the black mask of his face. In his right hand he raised a sixgun. He murmured:

"You haven't got me yet, Dawson. You ain't goin' to get me!" Slowly Risk's hand raised the gun. The glow from the fire at the other end of the room flickered over his agonizedly working features.

One of the men with Dawson raised his .45. Dawson reached out and knocked it down. "No," he said. "I've changed my mind. I want him alive. I want to see him kicking at the end of a piece of government rope."

He stepped forward and booted the gun out of Risk's fist just as the outlaw leader got it up into firing position.

Nick Risk looked at Dawson, his eyes wild and glittery. His lips moved but no words came out. Slowly his head drooped and then flopped forward on his neck and he fell from the bed to the floor as he passed out.

"Get him outside," Dawson told the others.

He swung his gaze around the flame-lit room. He saw Murchinson, sprawled crookedly under a fallen ceiling beam, the back of his head blown completely away. A few feet away from him, old man Henshaw, with his last bit of dying strength, was trying to claw his way across the floor with his one good arm, try-

ing to reach the other one which had been blown from his shoulder, leaving only a bloody stump. Henshaw would no more talk and dream of the days when he drove celebrities on the Deadwood-Cheyenne stage. The third outlaw was huddled in a corner of the room like a Mexican peon asleep in the shade. But the bloody top of his head told Dawson that it was the big and final sleep that he was passed on into.

Dawson strode through what was left of the rest of the house, but there was no sign of Ishmael Cobb. He ran toward the back door, which was flung wide open. He saw four horses still tethered back there. His gaze swept across the rolling rangeland and spotted a big, ghostlike figure crouched in the saddle of a galloping horse just as it was silhouetted briefly against the moonlight atop a rise of land, before it dipped down and then disappeared from sight.

Only a moment did Dawson hesitate. Then he unhitched one of the other mounts and forked into the saddle. He dug in his heels and bent low over the mane of the big gray. He felt the wind whipping past his face as the animal ate up ground with long, loping strides.

They whipped past the outlying buildings of homesteads and small ranches. Here, a few miles east of Carthage, the rolling rangeland ended and the terrain began to rise, become more rugged. Twice Dawson caught sight of Ishmael Cobb, but the distance between them didn't seem to be lessened. Dawson rode without slacking speed, taking chances on his mount breaking a leg and throwing him, through shallow gullies and ravines.

He was just about giving up hope of ever catching up with Cobb when he suddenly rode to the edge of the steep side of a coulee. Dawson's mount was travel-

ing too fast to stop. He went leaping off the edge of the coulee, and Dawson's heart turned over inside him as he felt the saddle dropping out from under him. The critter landed hard on the dry stream bed, its legs buckling, but it didn't fall. Dawson started to urge it on toward the other side and then stopped. He saw another horse a few yards away, lying on its side, kicking feebly, one leg twisted under it. He knew then that Cobb's mount hadn't successfully made the leap from the top of the bank.

Dawson looked around, hoping to see Cobb lying somewhere nearby where he'd been thrown from the fallen horse. But there was no sign of the big man. Moonlight flooded the coulee, glinted from mica-studded rocks like lamplight on diamonds. And then the steep-banked dried-up river bed echoed with the deafening slam of a .45. Something like a hot knife nicked at Dawson's ear and then went screaming on down the coulee.

Flinging himself flat onto the stony river bed, Dawson rolled over and over and into a pool of shade under a willow tree on the bank. He lay there gasping for breath and trying to slow the crazy ramming of his heart against his ribs. Careful not to cause any creak of leather, he eased one of his own guns from its holster. His eyes ran along the bed of the stream, but still he could see no sign of Ishmael Cobb.

He reached out and seized a stone and tossed it about ten yards ahead of him into another spot of shade from some box elders. Instantly from across the coulee, from the side of a great jagged boulder jutting out from the bottom of the bank, gunflame splashed a crimson gout. The sound of the shot rolled echoingly up and down the dried stream bed. The

bullet struck flat rock where Dawson had tossed the stone and ricocheted off at an angle.

Stretching out his arm, Dawson drew a bead on the rock that was protecting Cobb and hammered out two fast shots. He saw one of them strike sparks from the rock but he knew that the lead had been wasted. He merely wanted to make Cobb pull back and stop firing for a while to give Dawson a chance to think this out.

Ishmael Cobb's deep voice shouted: "Why don't you come and get me, Dawson? I won't shoot you if you'll throw down your guns. You put up a good scrap against Nick Risk. Why don't you try it with me? This way, we'll stay here all night, popping away at each other and get nowhere."

"No dice, Cobb. I'm not so sure I could take you, big as you are. And I've got to take you. The whole slate's got to be wiped clean this time."

Cobb didn't answer. Slowly Dawson eased his body toward the river bank. He thought that if he could climb up it, he might be able to move along the bank until he reached a point where Cobb would be in view. But before he'd moved more than a few feet, some loose stones rattled beneath him. Another slash of flame penciled from behind Cobb's rock barricade. This time the slug whistled close to Dawson's head and thudded into the river bank behind him. Cobb had learned where he was by following the sound of his voice. Dawson was afraid that another move on his part might make him an even better sound target for Cobb.

Cupping the side of his mouth with his hand, to throw his voice, Dawson hollered: "Reckon we'll just have to stick it out here all night. I can take it as long as you can, Cobb. And I've got a hunch some of the

others will be following along soon, to see what's happened to us."

There was no answer to that from Cobb. While they waited it out, Dawson saw the horse he'd been riding move slowly down toward Cobb. The animal held its head high, sniffing the night wind, undoubtedly catching the friendly, familiar scent from Cobb, and frightened by the thundering gunfire, was seeking the company of a familiar human. The import of this didn't strike Dawson for a moment. When it did, it was too late.

Cobb slammed three rapid fire shots from behind the rock and the slugs pocked the rocky ground around Dawson. At the same time Cobb came running out from behind his rock barricade and flung himself headlong astride the horse Dawson had ridden. Dawson realized that if Cobb got away with this he would probably escape clean. There was no way for Dawson to pursue him.

Dawson stood up and ran out from the shadows just as Cobb turned and slammed two more shots toward him. Dawson drew his other gun and triggered until both weapons were empty, slamming shot after desperate shot after the fugitive now riding hell-for-breakfast down the coulee. The echo of the last shot faded and still Cobb rode on. Dawson's guns were empty. He swore and stood there, filled with despair and disappointment. But then his heart came leaping up within him as he saw Cobb totter sideways in the saddle and then slip from the fast galloping horse. He lay there without moving.

Quickly Dawson reloaded his .45's. He ran up the rocky stream-bed toward the fallen figure of Ishmael Cobb. The big man's earrings flashed moonfire as the night breeze twirled them. Cobb was lying on his

belly, arms and legs both outspread. His head was turned away from Dawson, who approached the other man cautiously.

Dawson said: "If you're still alive, Cobb, you'd better speak up. I'm not taking any chances on your playing possum, getting the jump on me. If you don't speak by the time I count three, I'm going to pump lead into your big carcass to make sure you're dead."

Dawson waited, looking at Cobb's fallen sixgun only inches away from the outlaw's long, bejeweled fingers. Cobb could have reached it easily if he'd wanted to. Dawson also saw the moonglow shining dully on a spoltch of red on the back of Cobb's levis, behind the thigh.

"I must have got him somewhere else, too," Dawson mused. "That leg wound wouldn't knock him out." Aloud Dawson said: "All right, Cobb. I'm going to shoot. Unless you speak up."

There was no answer. Convinced now that no human being could lie still, if conscious, and wait for a bullet to thump into him, Dawson sighed and reholstered his guns. He stepped toward the big man and bent to snatch up Cobb's gun. As he did so, Cobb's huge hairy-backed hand shot out with the speed of a sidewinder's darting tongue. It seized Dawson's boot at the ankle, and lifted. Immediately Dawson was spilled to the river bed, flat on his back, with bone-jarring force. He heard Cobb cry:

"I knew you were only bluffing, Dawson. Your kind is soft and weak. You couldn't pump lead into the body of a man who couldn't defend himself!"

The gun Dawson had picked up had been knocked from his hand by the jarring force of his fall. Before he could reach down to his own guns, the huge bulk of Ishmael Cobb swarmed over him.

"One of your shots smashed a tendon or something in my leg," Cobb breathed. "I couldn't run. And I couldn't gun-fight you, lying out here in the open, unable to move. This was the only way."

Dawson didn't answer. He was too busy trying to fight off the huge hands that were straining to encircle his throat. He knew that once those sausage-like fingers of Cobb's fastened around his windpipe, he was finished. He got one leg out from under Cobb and swung it around, desperately, trying to toss it up and around Cobb's neck, but the big man twisted out of the way with amazing agility.

Then one of Dawson's hands slipped sweatily from Cobb's wrist. The giant's free hand now got a grip on Dawson's throat. The ball of his huge thumb pressed against Dawson's windpipe. The stars above Dawson's head blurred in one big wild flash of light as pain stabbed through his throat. He coughed and choked and then all wind was cut off from his lungs and they seemed to swell and get ready to burst. The sound of Cobb's chortling and cursing blurred in Dawson's ears.

Just before Dawson's consciousness faded, he reached around behind Cobb, looking for a grip, and his hand touched the warm wet blood smear at the back of Cobb's thigh. In desperation, Dawson's fingers clawed through the cloth at the wound underneath. He took hold of a fistful of meat over the wound and gouged and twisted it.

Cobb's hand instantly loosened from his throat. Sound came back into Dawson's ears as breath rushed back into his lungs, and he heard the big man's anguished scream of pain. Cobb rolled off Dawson, stretching and writhing in agony and reached back toward the wounded leg. Sucking in great cool gobs

of night air, Dawson regained some of his strength and rolled completely out from under Cobb and staggered to his feet. At the same time, Cobb got control of himself as the pain in his torn tendons subsided. He lunged toward the sixgun lying on the creekbed. Dawson stepped forward and kicked it out of his hand just as Cobb picked up the weapon.

This time when Cobb again reached for his ankle, Dawson yanked it out of reach just in time. Cobb was up on his hands and knees now. Dawson bent and swung a wild punch with every ounce of strength in him. It landed against Cobb's high cheekbone and the force of it jarred Cobb's head back. But before Dawson could strike again, Cobb lunged to his feet, standing on one leg, balancing himself. He was bellowing with rage and pain now like a brahma bull. His hand shot out and grabbed Dawson's shirtfront and twisted it. His other hand balled into a fist the size of a pile driver, slammed toward Dawson's face. Dawson rolled with the blow, twisted his head just in time to keep from being hit anything but a grazing punch.

The force of the swing carried all Cobb's weight lunging against Dawson. It bore both of them backward to the ground again.

Somehow, as they fell, Dawson managed to twist and get out of the way. This time it was Cobb who hurtled to the ground on the bottom. Dawson managed to slam his knee down on one of Cobb's long powerful arms. Then he slammed both fists into Cobb's face one after the other. He felt Cobb's teeth tear his knuckles open. He felt the other fist jar solidly against the other man's jawbone. Still Cobb kept struggling beneath him.

Almost exhausted, Dawson made one last try to

finish off his larger, heavier opponent. He jammed the heel of one hand into the deep-set socket of Cobb's eye, forcing his head way back. Then, with his other hand held stiffly, the fingers outstretched, he sliced the side of it down against Cobb's Adam's apple. He knifed down hard, twice. He didn't have to do it again.

Ishmael Cobb lay still, his eyes walled back in his head. Blood trickled from his broken mouth and from his ears, staining the dark puffs of hair that protruded from them. Cobb was no longer laboring for breath. There was none left in him. He was all through breathing forever.

Sobbing with exhaustion, Dawson rolled away from the other man and lay on his back on the rock-strewn coulee, looking up at the stars and not thinking, not feeling anything but the delicious sensation of complete relaxation after that titanic struggle. . . .

The funeral for the Parsons the next day was a compound of anguish and dread for Ben Dawson. It didn't help at all that four of the men who had killed them were now also dead, and the fifth one, Nick Risk, badly hurt and in prison, awaiting trial. The comforting words of the Carthage preacher didn't help any, either. Nothing did. Dawson knew that nothing would, either, except time. Lots of time.

A week later, U. S. Marshal Ben Dawson was granted a special private audience with and received a special personal commendation from Wyoming's Governor Warren for the job he had done on rounding up the Risk gang and recovering the stolen currency. The governor also said that he was going to write to President Harrison, personally, citing Dawson's bravery above and beyond the call of duty.

At first Dawson was little moved by even that un-

usual honor, but as he was leaving the capitol, he looked up at the cloud-fleeced sky and for a moment he swore that he saw the face of Callie Parsons up there, formed by a cloud. And she was smiling down at him. Almost immediately the cloud formation broke up and the illusion was gone. But Dawson felt that somehow Callie knew what had happened and that she was proud of him and happy for him. And he felt better after that.