

D-4 TURN OVER BOOK FOR 2nd NOVEL ➡

ACE
DOUBLE NOVEL
BOOKS

35c

Ruthless men and inflamed redskins in
an epic battle of the Colorado frontier

MASSACRE AT WHITE RIVER

LEWIS B.
PATTEN



An ACE
Original

***Thrilling fiction based on
exciting frontier history***

When Quentin Reed won control of the only freight line to the White River Indian Agency, he unwittingly forced into motion one of the vilest schemes for frontier plunder ever conceived. For the dirty work was to be masked by setting off a Ute rebellion which would bathe the entire region in fire and blood. And because Quentin further intervened to defend a lovely woman from the fists of her renegade husband an extra touch of horror was slated for the events to come.

Based on the grim facts of Colorado history, Lewis B. Patten's original novel MASSACRE AT WHITE RIVER is packed with the thunder of blazing guns, charging hoofs, and bruising knuckles. As Quentin Reed pits his muscle and skill against the might and fury of a maddened tribe, you will agree that here is a story of Western realism that cannot be put down until the last violent line.

**Some of the vivid characters
in this new novel:**

QUENTIN REED—The only thing he feared was the uncontrolled violence of his own temper.

JAMES OTIS—There was nothing, absolutely nothing, that he would not sacrifice for his own enrichment.

CARLIE OTIS—Her husband considered her only as bait for his scheming with savages.

NATHAN MEEKER—He was determined to teach the redmen the ways of civilization or die in the attempt.

COLOROW—Sub-chief of the powerful Ute tribe, he fell for James Otis' cunning.

PIAH—For the promise of a white man's house, she turned her back on her tribal heritage.

MAJOR THORNBURG—In command of the U.S. Cavalry, he refused to fire the first shot.

LEWIS B. PATTEN

MASSACRE AT WHITE RIVER

ACE BOOKS, INC.

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

MASSACRE AT WHITE RIVER

Copyright, 1952, by Ace Books, Inc.

All Rights Reserved

TO

BETSY

RIMROCK RIDER

Copyright, 1950, by Walker A. Tompkins

Printed in U.S.A.

Chapter 1

DUSK FILTERED down the timbered slopes, pooling darkly in the canyon, bringing with it a pre-winter chill, shading and softening the features of the rider that picked his solitary way through it. He was a tall man, showing this in the way he loomed in the saddle. His body, slim and thrifty, seemed only slightly top-heavy because of the wide shoulders and deep chest.

Liking the lushness of this high altitude, the grass and tumbling streams, he growled fiercely to himself, "You damn fool! You liked Wyoming, too, but that didn't keep you from pitchin' into a fight that was none of your business. Why don't you get smart? Stay out of other people's fights. It's the only way you'll ever have anything of your own."

"A fighting machine," was one of the terms folks used for Quentin Reed. He was "a man born for trouble," because he seemed through no conscious effort to gravitate to it, to fall into the middle of it.

"Hell on horseback," they'd said two weeks ago in Wyoming. He'd mixed in Molly Callahan's troubles up there with the unrecognized plan in the back of his mind that when it was over, he'd put down roots and stay with Molly. But the fear in her eyes, showing through the gratitude, kept him silent and sent him again on his way. Impatiently now, he shook his head. "Why should she've been afraid of me? I was fightin' the same outfit she was."

Stirring uneasily, he remembered the killing rage that had claimed him that last day on the street. Molly had seen that fight, had seen an elemental savagery in him. His face turned hot in the darkness, remembering, and he thought, "Why do I have to go hog-wild every time?"

Old ruts, dusted over, made the face of the wagon road he

followed uneven. He entered a thicket of willows, taller by a yard than his head, and coming out again, saw lights twinkling ahead.

"Otis' store," he thought, his heels unconsciously hurrying the gray.

The place rested sleepily in the widening canyon, seeming to have grown there. Against the hill squatted the store, a hundred feet long, built of mud-chinked logs, roofed with sod now browning with drought. Smaller buildings sprawled aimlessly about nearby. Across the trickle of water called Yellow Jacket Creek were the corrals and from there came a nicker, answered immediately by Quentin's gray.

He rode to the store's tie-rail and dismounted, feeling stiffness and chill in his legs.

A bright rectangle of light fell across the ground beside him and a pan of soapy water splashed. Quentin jumped back, picked his way around the frothy puddle and stepped to the door, removing his hat for the woman there.

She spoke with confused apology. "Oh! I didn't see you. Did I get you wet?"

"I ducked, ma'am." Quentin grinned down at her, startled, seeing the beauty of her even in the shadow that lay over her face. "This Otis' place?"

"Yes. Come in." Reserve touched her tone and she stepped aside.

The room was long, and its packed dirt floor was piled with the goods of the frontier in untidy rows. At one end, lighted more brightly than the rest, was a cleared area, and on one side of this was a long bar of hewed logs. Squatted against the log wall across from the bar were three Indians, a bottle on the floor before them.

Reed gave the woman a sidelong glance as he passed, and surprised a harried look of fear. Wondering briefly at this, he strode between the rows of stacked blankets, hardware and barrels to the bar.

A man rose from a barrel on which he had been sitting, a man of medium height, heavily-built. He moved with the assurance and grace of a mountain cat. His beard, silky and blue-black, was trimmed straight across the bottom, and his hair, long, curly and carefully brushed, touched the hollows

of his shoulders. He stuck his hand across the bar at Reed, grinning without warmth. "I'm Otis, mister. James Bragg Otis. What'll it be for you?"

Reed said, "A drink," and took the hand, resenting immediately the extreme pressure of the man's grip, but content only to match it sufficiently to keep his own hand from being crushed. This show of strength told him something of the man behind the bar. Otis was as vain of his own strength as Otis obviously was of his hair and beard.

Otis laughed, and releasing Reed's hand, set a bottle and two glasses on the rough bar-top.

The Indians, silently curious, stared at Reed from across the room. A sense of depression settled abruptly over him. There was something so oddly unclean about this place, the silent Indians, the handsome, vain, but somehow sinister man behind the bar. He gulped the whisky, trying to remember what he had heard of Otis as he came down the trail out of Wyoming.

Jumbled sentences came out of his memory. "Indian trader," spoken contemptuously. "Sells guns an' whisky to the Utes." "Squaw man. Ain't satisfied with the woman he married. Runs to Colorow's daughter, too." "Stirrin' up trouble, he is. Anybody kin see it."

Reed fished in his pocket, remembering he had spent his last silver dollar in Rawlins. He unbuttoned his shirt, found a double eagle in the front pouch of his money belt, and laid it on the bar. Otis was watching him, and Otis' tongue dampened his lips. Catching Reed's glance, he dropped his eyes. Reed thought, "Sleep light tonight, you fool. You've shown him just enough to make sound sleep a mite risky."

But Otis was turning away, and he purred smoothly, "Supper ought to be ready." He moved down through the piled trade goods and disappeared behind a curtain that ran the width of the store. Reed heard the soft murmur of his voice, and then a woman's voice. Otis came back. "Come on," he said, making change for the gold piece out of his pocket. "I'm takin' out half a dollar for your supper. You can lay your bed anywheres in here. That won't cost you nothing."

Reed followed him, shouldering aside the curtain. This, Otis' living quarters, matched the bareness and drabness of

the store, but it was cleaner. An iron bed occupied one corner, a stove another. Between them was a long, plank table with benches on either side.

Otis grunted, "My wife, mister," and "Carlie, this is . . ." Otis looked expectantly at Reed. Reed murmured, "Reed, ma'am. Quentin Reed."

She was not tall, and was neatly dressed in bright, starched calico. Her skin was pale, excessively so, but white and flawless in texture. Only once did her startling violet eyes rest on Otis, and when they did, Reed discovered in them a virulent hate that made him catch his breath.

Openly, she did not look at Reed, either, but as he ate, he had the feeling that she was watching him, and once, he abruptly raised his eyes to her, catching her glance on him, strangely empty of expression, but intent and calm. She flushed with confusion.

Otis asked, "You heading down into the Indian country, mister? What's your business—cattle?"

Reed grunted, "Mostly cattle. I'm looking for a place to light."

Otis said, "Utes are touchy about whites crossing the reservation. I'd swing east a ways an' skirt the border. You wouldn't be interested in a going freight line, would you?" His eyes dropped, greedily suggestive, toward the money belt beneath Reed's shirt.

Reed said, "I don't think so. You got one to sell?"

Otis nodded. "I'm too damned busy running this store to fool with freight. I got seven wagons an' fifty-three head of horses. Plenty of harness an' parts for the wagons. Contract with the Indian Agency at White River. You buy it an' you can haul my plunder for me, too."

Otis' wife stood behind the man, a granite coffee pot in her hand. Imperceptibly she shook her head at Reed. Her hair was richly golden, gleaming, knotted in a bun on her white neck.

Reed gave his attention to his food.

When supper was over, they returned to the bar, and Otis slid a stiff drink toward Reed. Conversation was slow.

Otis threw a bored kick at a half empty barrel and grunted, "Dull night. Usually there's a few punchers from the ranches

around to kind of liven things up. How about a couple of hands of poker? Small stakes. Help pass the time."

Reed grinned inwardly, thinking, "Small stakes. For how long?" But he nodded and, moving away from the bar, sat down at the wobbly-legged table and waited. He was a confident poker player, sure of his luck, sure of his ability to crowd it when it needed crowding. At least in an honest game. In any other kind of game, he was sure of himself, too. For in Reed was a peculiar kind of muscular co-ordination that made him equally deadly with fists, gun or cards. It was one of his characteristics that he threw himself into what he did wholeheartedly and without reservation. So in learning cards, the use of his fists, and his gun, he had become expert. Nothing short of perfection would satisfy him.

Otis brought a new deck of cards and handed it to Reed. "Break an' shuffle 'em," he said.

A hasty glance at Otis' living quarters showed Reed a parted curtain and a white face peering through. Grinning, he shuffled the deck expertly, but the vague unease grew in him, mingling with rising excitement. He dealt, and lost. Otis dealt, and also lost. Somewhere around nine o'clock, a couple of Indians came in, one of them big, fat, and surlily overbearing. Otis broke away from the game reluctantly to get the Ute a bottle. When he came back he grunted, "That's Colorow. He's one of the Ute sub-chiefs, but one with a lot of power in the tribe." His brow was misted with tiny, glistening beads of sweat. He forced a wry grin as he looked at the pile of double eagles in front of Reed, ten to a stack, ten or twelve stacks in all. Silver had been pushed carelessly aside by Reed, uncounted, and forgotten as the stakes mounted.

At midnight, Otis, controlled rage glittering in his eyes, ripped the hand Reed had just dealt him across the middle and threw it disgustedly to the floor. "Damn you, you've broke me!"

Reed tensed. He murmured softly, "You quittin'?" swinging his chair slightly so that he could view the Indians, who had lifted their heads and were now staring at him with black, impassive eyes.

Otis said hurriedly, "Tell you what. I'll shove that freight line into the pot against what you've won. You win this hand

an' you're in business an' got the capital to operate on. Lose an' we're square. How about it?"

Reed remembered Mrs. Otis' carefully shaken head. But he couldn't refuse. A gambler didn't refuse a man a fair chance to get even. Reed wanted no part of this freight line. He wanted to move on. He sensed trouble brewing here—trouble he could get involved in against his will. He nodded, but he was hoping he would lose, and in this frame of mind, he could not do otherwise. All during the game it had taken wit against wit, skill against skill. Luck had nothing to do with the game. Luck would have nothing to do with this draw. One would shuffle, the other cut. He would win whose hands and eyes were quickest.

Otis picked up a deck from the table, one which had been laid aside in disgust, shuffling rapidly. Now Reed automatically called upon his memory for each small marking on these cards, each speck of dirt. Memory, as he well knew, was a gambler's strongest ally.

Sweat globules grew in size on Otis' swarthy forehead, and one trickled off the end of his nose. Faint perfume wafted into Reed's nostrils. He turned his head, immediately snapping it back to watch Otis. But he had seen the woman's fear-filled eyes, had glimpsed the entreaty in them. She stood not a foot from his shoulder and she murmured softly now, "A freight line is the life of this country. There's no other way for folks to get the things they need. Don't win it unless you can run it better than he has."

She knew then—knew that Reed had won tonight only because he had been able to out-cheat the cheater, Otis. She knew that within certain limits, he could win or lose this hand, as he chose. The fear in her eyes—that was fear that should he win, he would never see another dawn.

Puzzled, he felt down the smooth sides of the deck, cut near the bottom, and knew before turning it that he had the King of Hearts. That King had a furred, fuzzed edge where earlier Reed's fingernail had scraped. Fortune gave Otis a slight chance of winning should he turn an ace. Reed had reduced the chance of Otis' turning an ace whose location in the deck he knew, by cutting deep so that only a dozen cards remained.

Otis' face blackened with rage, but he cut, and turned a Queen of Spades. Unuttered words rumbled in his thick throat, a deep growl that was almost a snarl. The woman moved in behind Reed, directly behind him. Veins stood out on Otis' broad forehead. Choked words tumbled out of his mouth, "Damn you, Carliel Get back where you belong!"

Reed said without turning, softly, "Go on, ma'am. If he thinks he can kill me, he'll try it, either now or later."

But her knowledge of Otis was better than his. She stayed another moment until the rage left the bearded man and the calm, sardonic grin returned to the red, full lips. Then Reed sensed, rather than heard, her withdrawal.

Otis rose, laughing. "Hell, anyone would get mad, losin' that much." But Quentin did not relax, because in Otis' eyes had been born an unreasoning hate, implacable and terrible, that the laugh and the smiling face could not conceal. He picked up the gold in front of him and stuffed it into his coat pocket. Otis was writing out a bill of sale. Reed tipped the bottle, dumped a glass half-full and raised it to his lips. Uneasiness made him merely taste it. He folded the bill of sale and shoved it into his coat on top of the gold.

"I'll unsaddle my horse," he said, and went toward the door, his neck crawling from the hot glances of Otis and the Indians. Before he was quite through it, he heard the soft shuffling of moccasined feet as the Indians rose and moved toward the bar. Stepping through, he went swiftly to his horse, slipping off the saddle and blanket and throwing them against the wall of the store. Then he led the animal through the soft, heavy dark toward the corral. He floundered into the creek, wetting his legs halfway to the knees, and cursed softly. The horse stopped and sucked water noisily.

When the horse was corraled and fed, Quentin slipped silently downstream, circled, and came again to the store from the hillside. Rounding the corner, he could see the dark shapes of the Utes, waiting for him down by the creek. Anger sparked and grew within him, and thankfulness for this habitual, animal caution that was so much a part of him. Picking up his bed-roll, he went inside.

Otis turned, startled, and Reed stared at him with studied, deliberate insolence. The big man flushed. Reed said flatly,

"You yellow son-of-a-bitch. If you want me killed, why don't you do it yourself?"

For a long moment the two stared across the narrow gap between them. Then Otis turned on his heel with a last malevolent glance at Reed, and stalked toward his quarters. In the guttering light from the turned-down lamp, Reed laid his bed-roll between two rows of barrels, and a few minutes later, in inky darkness, he silently moved it halfway across the room. He knew there would be no sleep for him that night.

Chapter 2

CARLIE OTIS whirled defensively as Otis shouldered through the curtain. In his eyes she could read his thoughts, and they were not pleasant. He said softly, "Mixin' in again. Won't you ever learn?" his voice freighted with ugliness and threat.

She lifted a kitchen knife from the table and held it idly before her. Fear ran through her, settling in a cold, icy lump in her breast. Seldom now did she think back to the days when she and Otis were first married. If someone had asked her why she had married him at all, she would have been nonplused, would have had to force her memories of those first days before she had discovered the streak of sadism and cruelty in him, the overpowering greed.

Otis eyed the knife and stopped, measuring the determination in Carlie's eyes. His own eyes narrowed, and then unexpectedly he grinned. "You don't need that knife. I only wanted to kiss you. Hell, I'm goin' to bed."

He turned away, and Carlie shuddered. He would go to bed and he would feign sleep, knowing that when she came, she would not bring the knife with her. He was like a cat, playing with a mouse, knowing that in the end he would win.

Carlie laid the knife back on the table resignedly. There was no defense against the man. If he did not beat her tonight, he would humiliate her with his brutal caresses. Spirit returned to her, thinking of Quentin Reed, and she said, deliberately provoking the beating, "He won your freight line. How much of your money did he win? You won't get it back by killing him, either. He's too much for you."

Otis whirled, and his face swelled and reddened with rage. "Damn you! Shut up!" He came toward her slowly. The sly grin returned to his heavy lips. "Colorow wants you so bad

he can't keep his eyes off this curtain when he's here. Some day I'll be gone an' he'll get up enough courage to . . ."

Carlie tried desperately to control the panic that rose to her face, and knew she had failed. Her husband, taking advantage of her frozen immobility, advanced with a rush, closed her in his brutally-powerful arms.

These brutal moods were on him oftener now. Unrest stirred the country, and fear rode the dark of the night. Marauding Utes raided up and down the Milk River, and the Bear, and with each passing day the tension in Otis mounted. Lately he spent more time with Colorow, and often went to the Reservation to the councils of the other chiefs. But when Carlie would ask him for news from the White River Indian Agency, he would growl surlily, "Didn't go near the place. Can't stand that damned sanctimonious fool, Meeker."

Suddenly, Otis shoved her from him, and she sprawled to the floor. He caught her by the bodice and yanked her up, tearing the cloth. His fist caught her high on the cheekbone, slammed her again to the floor. Carlie thought of the stranger, Reed, and wondered with sick shame if he lay listening to this. She murmured almost inaudibly, "Please! That man out there . . ."

"Damn him!" Otis yanked her to her feet again. This time his fist caught the point of her jaw, and red and orange lights danced crazily before her eyes before the dark blotted them out.

With nothing but a flimsy burlap curtain to deaden sound, Reed could not help but hear every word and move. He heard the unmistakable smack of fist against flesh, and half rose, full of outrage, from his bed, only to sink back again, shame sick within him and with the full knowledge that a man who interferes in a quarrel between husband and wife is a fool.

He heard the soft cursing of Otis, obscene and steady, stopping abruptly when the man apparently realized that his wife could no longer hear him. "Christ," Otis grumbled finally. "You're really out, ain't you? Well, I'm goin' down to

the Reservation and stay with a real woman tonight. I'll tell you all about it when I get back."

Reed heard his deadened footfalls, the rustle the curtain made as it was thrust aside. He tensed as Otis paused, apparently remembering his guest, and the loss of his gold and freight line. Otis catfooted to the place where he had seen Reed lay his bed. Finding the spot empty, he released a long, bitter curse.

Reed maintained his silence, and after a seemingly endless pause, heard Otis continue to the door and go out, muttering.

He waited until the hoofbeats of a horse had died away, and then he sat up, reaching for his boots. "I'll ride back in the timber a mile or so an' bed down there. Let him keep his damned freight line. If I'm going to dodge trouble, now's a mighty good time to start."

He strapped on his gunbelt and rolled up his blankets. Going down the long aisle, he paused and twisted a smoke. As he passed the burlap curtain, he lit a match, jumping aside nervously as he saw the white arm and hand of Otis' wife protruding beneath it.

Advancing again toward the door, he fought to control his reluctance at leaving an unconscious woman so. Then with a sigh at the seeming inevitability of it, he stopped, and throwing his bed-roll aside, shoved on through into Otis' living quarters.

It took him a moment to find the lamp. By its light he saw her, lying as she had fallen. Her dress was torn at neck and shoulder, and her hair, undone, catching glints of golden light from the lamp, lay across her throat.

Quentin looked at her face, still and pale and full of peace. Lashes, a darker gold, rested on her cheeks. A drop of blood, redder than her lips, stood out at one corner of her full mouth.

Reed knelt beside her, touching her hand gingerly. He spoke quietly, but his voice was hoarse. "Mrs. Otis." And more loudly, "Ma'am!" When she did not stir, he spoke again, experimentally, "Charlie."

Feeling that this must be done, but fearing that she might wake and be frightened, he slipped his arms under her, raised her, and carried her to the bed. Resolutely, he drew the patchwork quilt to her chin. He found a clean towel and

dipped it in the pail of icy water that stood on the table. Returning, he bathed her swollen face gently. Now again he said, "Carlie. Carlie!"

She moaned softly, stirred, and then abruptly she sat up, staring at him with frightened and startled eyes. He backed off a step. "You remember me. No call to get scared. I been here all evening. I couldn't leave, with you like this."

Blood surged in her face and neck, and she dropped her eyes. A hand stole to her bruised face, experimentally touched the quilt drawn about her shoulders, slipped under it and encountered her torn dress.

Flushing angrily and with bitter humiliation, she turned her face from him to the wall. Her, "Thank you," had a resentful ring.

"Well, I'll go now." Reed backed toward the curtain.

He swung around and was thrusting aside the curtain when he heard her voice behind him, "You're forgetting that freight line, aren't you? You can't go 'till daylight and James gets back to turn it over to you."

Reed tried to control his rising exasperation. "I only stopped here tonight for a meal an' a place to sleep. I'm just passing through. Now I've got a damn freight line. If I don't get out now, I'm likely to have a hell of a sight more trouble than that before morning." Warm color rose into her face, but mischief suddenly lurked behind the violet of her eyes. The corners of her mouth softened with the faint suggestion of a smile. "You don't look like a man that's afraid of trouble."

The words had the sound of an invitation, but somehow, seeing in her pinched face and haunted eyes, the tracks that fear had left, he knew it was not.

Rashly he said, "Pull out of here. Quit that ugly—"

"Where would I go?" Already the angry red spot on her cheekbone was paling and turning blue.

"Haven't you any folks?"

"No."

Again the inevitability of what was happening impressed itself upon Reed. "How about Meeker down at the Indian Agency? He'd let you stay until you could think this out, wouldn't he?"

Carlie appeared to ponder this, still clutching the quilt about her throat.

But knowing that by his words he was drawing himself deeper into trouble, he said, "Change your dress, and get a coat. I'm drifting south anyway. I'll take you down to the Agency and leave you with Meeker."

"No. I couldn't . . ." Tentatively she raised a slender hand to stroke the bruise on her face. Reed could tell that her thoughts were turning backward, were remembering that this bruise was not the first, nor would it be the last. Suddenly her mouth firmed with decision. "Get the horses ready. Take that sorrel in the corral for me. It's mine."

Reed was seeing still another facet of her character in this brisk decisiveness, and stared for a moment before he wheeled to go out.

It lacked a scant two hours of dawn as they rode away. The moon was down, and Reed had difficulty in following the road in darkness. But eventually his eyes became accustomed to the chill, inky air, and he could make out its twisting, upward course. Carlie rode in silence behind him, clad in denim pants and heavy jacket, with the few things she wanted to take tied in a bundle behind her saddle. The air was frosty, and great clouds of steam poured from the nostrils of Reed's gray. He called back over his shoulder, "You know this road? Does it take us into the Agency?"

"It takes us to White River. Then we turn west for a mile or two." She was silent for a moment before she continued, "The Reservation boundary is at the top of this pass. It's called Yellow Jacket Pass."

It occurred to Reed, listening to her, that even her voice was beautiful. It had warmth and feeling, and a throaty loveliness that made him smile in the darkness.

He thought of Carlie for a while after she stopped speaking, and then his thoughts drifted away. The realization of just how serious a thing he was doing began to dawn on him. He avoided this realization by saying soundlessly to himself, "Hell, by nightfall tomorrow I'll be clear to Grand River. If Otis wants a scrap over this he'll have to come a hell of a

long way for it." Oddly enough, the thought of continuing southward depressed him.

For three or four miles they rode in silence, the only sounds the faint squeak of saddle leather and the fall of unshod hooves on the road. During one pause to blow the horses, Carlie ranged her horse alongside Reed's and whispered softly, "There may be Indians about. We're near the boundary now."

Reed grunted. "What if we are? Just so we don't run into your husband, we'll be all right."

After a barely perceptible hesitation, she murmured, "They're restless and quarrelsome. They fired a settler's wagon at the top of the pass a month ago. He said they shot at him, too. I just thought you ought to know."

Reed asked, "Was that why you shook your head last night when Otis offered to sell me that freight line?"

"Partly."

Reed touched his heels to the gray's barrel and moved away from her. Anger touched him briefly and strengthened his resolve to leave her at the Agency and continue southward. Damn people, anyway. They seem to have no scruples at all against involving you in their troubles and quarrels.

The sky turned gray, then pink. As they topped the last ridge, the sun, which had not yet risen, turned the heavens to copper and laid a weird glow over the land as though some awesome fire burned in the wild and rugged country to the east.

They came out of the scattering timber through which the road wound and abruptly entered a small clearing. Motionless—startling—three Utes sat their horses directly in the center of the road, facing Reed and the woman.

Reed's first impulse was to halt, to get out his gun. But he deliberately ignored this, and his hesitation was hardly perceptible and might have been caused by his horse's sudden fright. Without turning his head, he spoke to Carlie, "The big one's Colorow. Who're the others?"

Her voice was tight with panic. "The old one is Johnson. I never saw the other. He looks like a Southern Ute."

Reed rode onward slowly until he was ten feet from the trio. He drew rein and waited.

Colorow was dressed in a ragged, red flannel shirt, wool trousers that were shiny with grease and dirt, and buckskin leggings. Atop his head he wore a straw hat, and it perched there stolidly. On either side, his long, plaited and greased hair hung down, a braid lying on each side of his chest and reaching nearly to his belt.

His face was ludicrously stern, and a smear of red paint lay on each cheek, angling downward to his jawbone. He raised a hand. "No go on," he grunted. "This Colorow land, Ute land. Go back. I take woman."

Reed felt the sudden, unpredictable rage stirring in him. "Like hell! Get out of the road."

Reed's scalp seemed to tighten, and he thrust the whispermings of caution aside. He shifted his weight, and his eyes turned wild. Some rueful voice murmured, "It always starts this way. Some day your rashness will get you killed."

The words tumbled from his mouth, clipped and uncompromising, "I'm heading into the Indian Agency. Get out of the road, you bastards!"

Colorow gave him a look of contempt. He nudged his pony past Reed, around him, and paused beside Carlie. Reed swung his head to watch, a remnant of caution holding him still.

Cold terror lay in Carlie's widened, violet eyes. Her face was bloodless, her lips gray. Pity stirred in Reed and fed the flames of his rage. Suddenly Colorow reached out a hand, touched the girl, leered and crowded closer. Carlie shrank away, her face a study of sheer, frozen fear.

Reed wheeled his horse, drove him ahead then, into the side of Colorow's stunted pony, felt a savage pleasure in the brutal impact. Reed came out of the saddle, his boots bracing momentarily on the side of Colorow's mount, while he grasped the big Indian by the braids and yanked. Back he went, grunting as he hit the ground, again as the Indian landed on top of him. Then he let go the braids and lashed out with his fists.

Half a dozen hard blows he struck, and then, with the sudden and uneasy reminder in him of the other two, lunged to his feet, gun in hand, hammer thumbed back. He was panting raggedly, and his teeth were a splash of white in his sun-

darkened face. "God damn you! All of you! Don't ever try to keep me from where I want to go!"

Johnson halted in the act of raising his rifle. Reed mounted, panting to Carlie, "Ride out! I'll follow."

He waited until she was hidden in the timber, and then he followed, his gun still covering the stunned and bewildered Utes.

Chapter 3

OTIS' sudden decision to ride to the Reservation tonight was only partly on account of Piaah, Colorow's daughter. Mainly it was because of Reed. Otis ruefully admitted to himself that he had underestimated Reed, and he still smarted under Reed's bald and bitter challenge, which he had not accepted, he assured himself, only because a quarrel or a killing might endanger his plans. But Reed was a danger, and must be disposed of. Colorow would be able to arrange that.

This new worry, on top of all the other apprehension on his mind, turned him morose and angry. Otis was a man who hated delays. And it seemed as though delays were plaguing him unmercifully lately. The Utes were too damned slow in making up their minds. This was the 23rd of September. Already winter blew its bleak breath from the high ranges. Soon snow would fall and then it would be too late. Even a firebrand like Colorow couldn't talk the tribe into a winter uprising.

On this uprising depended the realization of Otis' feverish planning for more than two years, his driving and insatiable ambition—to be rich. He wondered what Carlie would say if she knew Colorow was expecting her as his reward for betraying his tribe into an uprising he knew to be senseless and foolish. Hints and sly innuendoes had given him this notion, as Otis had known it would. But he had no intention of ever making good. He had no great love for Carlie—had even grown to hate her. But he would not give her to Colorow because even in him there lingered a remnant of white man's pride. But let Colorow think he could have her, even let Carlie think so too. When this was over, he'd leave them both behind.

He spurred his horse mercilessly, driven by this obscure

rage, this rage that never seemed to diminish of late, but smoldered incessantly. Otis carried and remembered grudges. He had one against the Army, for cashiering him over a matter of selling quartermaster stores to civilians and pocketing the money. He had one against the Interior Department because they refused to let him locate his post inside the Reservation. He had one against Carlie because she saw through him, knew him inside and out, and hated him for what he was.

As the moon dropped behind the clouds, he topped Yellow Jacket Pass, and put his horse into a run on the down-grade, feeling a temporary lift in his spirits from the headlong, reckless pace. An hour later, he pulled to a sliding halt in the cluster of tepees and shacks beside the White River.

Half a dozen dogs ran out, barking. An uneasy brave beside a lone fire sat up in his blankets and raised his carbine. Otis yelled, "Put that down, you damned fool! Where's Colorow?"

The Indian tossed his head contemptuously toward Colorow's lodge, not speaking, but saying graphically by his manner, "Where would you expect to find him?"

Anger rose in Otis, and before he controlled it, he bellowed, "Colorow!" regretting this tone immediately, and saying placatingly to the brave, "Tell him Otis is here. Tell him I want to see him."

The Indian grunted, but he rose sleepily. Before he could reach the entrance to Colorow's tepee, an Indian girl pushed aside the flap and came out. The brave resumed his squatting posture, and the girl advanced toward Otis.

She was tall, for an Indian woman, and fairer of skin than most. She wore a dark blue gown, a white woman's gown, doubtless one her father had stolen from some settler's cabin. Her hair was plaited and lay over one shoulder.

Her eyes, dark and soft, worshipped Otis silently. She murmured. "He is gone. Since sundown. But stay awhile with me—please?"

Sight of her usually stirred Otis, made him remember other nights. But tonight, he only felt a vague irritation. His mind was busy with Colorow. Where in hell was the devil? Why hadn't he come here after leaving Otis' post tonight? What

was he up to? Could he have waited outside the post, waited until he saw Otis leave, intending then to go inside and seize Carlie? If he did that now, he would automatically destroy Otis' bargaining power over him. Otis scowled.

He thought of Reed, remembering the man and his lips curled into an unpleasant smile. Reed was a fighting man. He'd defend Carlie all right. But suppose he killed Colorow? Otis considered this briefly, and his smile widened. Even the death of Colorow at Reed's hands would serve its purpose. Unless he was badly mistaken, the Utes were very near the point where they would don their war-paint. If one of their chiefs were killed by a white man that would be the spark needed to set them off. If the thing went the other way, if Colorow killed Reed and kidnaped Carlie, the result would be about the same. The Government would send in troops and the Utes would revolt anyway.

Otis thought, "Let things take their course. When a tribe is ready for the war-path, it only takes some little thing, some little unimportant thing—" He slipped an arm about Piah's waist, his mind turning from his problems to her pliant voluptuousness, and excitement flushed his face as she pressed her body close against him.

For a while he forgot his feverish planning, his restless dreams. Later, with Piah beside him, his mind resumed its endless, devious activity.

He must kill Reed, or have him killed, before the week was out. If he worked it right, he'd recover his gold, and the freight line as well.

Otis knew he would need those wagons and horses to salvage what he had at the post before he allowed the Indians to burn it. Smiling to himself, he murmured, "No one will say I wasn't hurt as much as anyone. No one can say it was me that stirred them up."

Now, sleepily, his mind turned to cattle; two thousand head of fat, sleek cattle, branded with the Interior Department's ID brand, but soon to wear a slightly altered brand, the JBO of James Bragg Otis. Just before he slept, he thought hazily, "If only that fool, Meeker, would do something right now, something that'd make his Utes fightin' mad . . ."

Piah heard his snores and smiled fondly as she raised a hand to stroke his beard. For some reason, perhaps due to her upbringing in a white Mormon household, Piah had a desire that was almost an obsession to live like the whites, in a white community, to forget her Ute blood. If Colorow took that woman, Otis' wife, then perhaps Otis would in turn take Piah.

She knew that time was running out, knew that Otis would soon be leaving. But she would not tell him that. She would wait until the time arrived, would let him get caught with his plans half completed. Then she would provide the help needed to round up the cattle and drive them from the country. In this way she would force Otis' decision to take her with him.

But uneasily, Piah considered another thing that she also knew. Only Colorow and a few of the younger hotheads were planning the uprising. Without the support and backing of the whole tribe, it would be an abortive attempt and useless.

Douglass, the head chief, and a cautious, crafty man, lived at the Agency in a log cabin Meeker had built for him. Douglass' son went to Meeker's school. Douglass' hand would have to be forced. For a long time, Piah's active mind darted from possibility to possibility. Toward morning, she slipped from the bed, dressed and stole out into the gray cold. Horse-racing offered Piah her solution. When the Utes gathered to draw supplies for the winter, a week hence, an extremely important part of their celebration would be the horse-races and the wagering. If Meeker plowed up the racetrack before that time as he had so often threatened to do—Piah smiled. Douglass would be unable to withstand the pressure the entire tribe would put upon him. He would have no other choice than to put his approval upon the revolt.

Carlie rode like a demon. Reed could catch an occasional glimpse of her, hair streaming out, a flame in the golden sunlight. He spurred the gray, pounding down the winding road in pursuit. Reaction set in, and he could feel the rebellious nerves jumping in his arms and neck. "I oughtn't to let myself get mad." But looking at the running girl, terror and panic in every line of her body, thinking of the fat, blus-

tering Colorow laying his hands on her, he felt the anger rising in him again.

He caught her on the last rise before the road dropped down into the valley of the White River. Here, the valley was broad, lush with belly-deep grass. Tall spruces stirred in the brisk morning breeze. The encampment of the Utes was a doll-like thing below him, as were the gleaming shapes of the cattle that grazed the length of the valley.

Charlie's horse was lathered and blowing harshly. Reed grinned at her reassuringly. "That's mighty hard on horses. How come you're so all-fired scared of Indians?"

"James threatened me with Colorow. I . . ." She paled and looked away. "I mean . . ."

Reed's mouth was bitter and harsh. "I should've killed him last night when I had the chance."

"No. This isn't your trouble. I'm sorry you had to get involved in it. I'll be all right when I get to the Agency."

"Maybe. If he don't come after you. Anyway, I'm always in some kind of trouble, an' if it wasn't yours it'd be someone else's."

He rode beside her until they reached the valley floor. "What kind of man is this Meeker?" he asked. "I've heard about him ever since I left Rawlins. Some say he's a saint. Some say he's a crook, cheating the Indians. Some say he's just a plain damn fool and stirs up trouble because he don't know any better."

Charlie's face was thoughtful, but it contained an unwilling awareness of the intense masculinity of the man beside her. "I guess he's none of those things. I think he's—well, an idealistic man trying to do the job he was sent out here to do—maybe trying to do it too well. I can't tell you what he's like, though. You'll have to see him for yourself."

"He'd like to see the Utes live like the whites," she continued after a thoughtful pause. "He wants to see them farming, raising livestock. He wants to see them living in houses, and their children going to school."

Quentin could not help grinning at the thought. "Trouble is, an Indian wants his home to be portable. He can't feel secure living in the same place all the time. Is Meeker making any headway?"

"Not much. He built a cabin for Douglass, the head chief, and managed to get him to live in it. He started a school, but the only Ute in it is Douglass' son. The main trouble is that Utes and most other Indians, for that matter, look at work differently than we do. To them, manual labor is for women and the men are hunters and fighters."

"What are you going to do?" He changed the subject abruptly, his mind failing to find much interest in Meeker and his Utes.

She frowned, her face full of indecision. "I don't know. Go to Rawlins with the mail contractor, perhaps." She plainly sought to reassure herself. "Other women manage to make a living alone."

They were passing to the left of a low ridge, capped with sheer sandstone, its base strewn with huge chunks that through the ages had broken off and rolled down. Carlie had dropped behind, her horse still following his closely. To the left, a quarter mile away, an Indian girl passed, barelegged, riding astride a galloping pony, her hair flying out behind. On the riverbank a muscular buck, naked, was bathing.

Something made Reed look upward to the right, toward the top of the sandstone bluff, and he searched the rim, seeing nothing. But an odd feeling of alertness came over him, a feeling for which he could find no justification. "Getting jumpy," he thought.

Abruptly, dust kicked up from the road ten feet ahead of him. There was a seemingly harmless, sodden sound, followed almost immediately by the vicious crack of a rifle on top of the bluff. Reed stiffened, and his horse lunged back on its haunches. From across the river, the shot echoed back, but Reed was already in motion. He yelled at Carlie, "Can you shoot?" When she nodded wordlessly, he handed her his carbine with the parting caution, "Get into those trees and stay!" Now, his initial surprise turning to anger, he set his spurs deep in the gray's sides and charged up the slope, leaning forward, his revolver out and cocked.

The horse stumbled and clawed for footing on the steep, loose side of the bluff. He dodged and swerved, and once nearly went over backward. Reed leaned forward, his face pale, and as the horse reached the rim, leaped off, scrambling

up the precipitous face of rock. His gun was back in its holster now, for he needed both his hands for climbing. Above him he could hear the sounds of a struggle, and once, a dislodged rock narrowly missed his head, grazing his shoulder and turning it numb.

Then he was out on top and saw the two Indians struggling for possession of a rifle, their faces straining, the muscles and cords of their necks standing out in sharp relief.

He put his gun on them, saying sharply, "All right. Break it up or I'll break a couple of heads."

They broke apart, panting, and the taller one gripped the rifle by its muzzle, clublike. Reed's voice turned softly vicious. "Easy, damn you!" The Ute flung the gun to the ground with an impatient gesture.

"Now, what in hell's going on?" The Indian, who had finished the tussle in possession of the rifle, glared at him, ignoring his question. He was tall, and aquiline-featured and his expression was as still and cold as a piece of stone. The shorter Ute was the one Carlie had called Johnson up on the pass.

Johnson grunted, "Johnson an' Jack no agree. Fight. Gun go off."

Reed thought, "Like hell!" and wondered why this Jack should try to save his life. He heard a rattle of chain, and a half-grown brown bear lumbered from behind a pile of rocks and approached. Involuntarily Reed moved the muzzle of the gun to cover the bear, but Johnson leaped in front of it and cried, "No! Tame bear! Johnson's bear!" and turning, almost ran to the bear. The bear grunted, turned, and the two went off down the slope, the bear's chain collar rattling as he walked.

Reed sighed with relief. He grinned at Jack, but his slowly receding anger made the grin tight and mirthless. "Thanks," he said.

No smile lightened the Indian's face, but it seemed to Reed that it softened imperceptibly. Though he did not know it, this man was chief, second only to the aging Douglass. This was the man who had fought the Cheyennes and Arapahoes and the whites on the plains—as a boy. His eyes were black and fierce. His hair was smoothly-plaited and oiled, and he was naked to

the waist, his skin brown and smooth. His face, unlined, bore smears of red paint which sweat had softened and carried in rivulets down the sides of his neck. Scorning white man's garb, he wore buckskin trousers, skin-tight and beautifully fringed and beaded, and on his feet, worn and ragged moccasins. He picked up a bandoleer filled with bright, shiny brass cartridges, and slinging it across his shoulder, stalked off without a word. Reed climbed back down the face of rimrock to his horse, mounted, and slid the animal downward to where Carlie, to his intense relief, was still waiting. It occurred to him that had the Indians' plan been to divert him while they seized her, he could not have cooperated more fully had he tried, and he told himself, "Let that goddamned temper of yours simmer down."

Relief showed in Carlie's eyes as he approached, and something like incredulous admiration, but she did not speak. Reed grinned. "Johnson. He must've made tracks to beat us down here from the pass."

"What happened?"

He told her briefly. From his description she named the tall brave for him. "Captain Jack, or Ute Jack as he's sometimes called. He probably didn't want a white man killed on the Reservation. That would mean an investigation and possibly the arrival of troops. No Ute wants that."

A deep feeling of uneasiness stirred in Quentin, a sense of impending disaster that contrasted sharply with the bright and sunny valley, the apparently happy and peaceful Utes.

The Agency lay dozing amid green, fenced fields in which tall corn waved, pastoral and quiet. To the south stretched a long, timbered ridge, broken in the middle by a gash through which a small creek trickled to the river. Northward lay bare and rocky ridges, pointing at the Agency like accusing fingers.

Carlie's voice was subdued and hushed, almost awed. "Those ridges there—they look like gigantic lizards, waiting to pounce on an insect, don't they?" Reed, not entirely disagreeing, smiled at her simile.

A tall, angular and graying man came out of the rambling log house and stood shading his eyes against the glare, looking at them. As they drew closer, Reed could see that Meeker's

left eye was bruised and black and his lips swollen and puffy.

His eyes twinkled at the look of consternation in Meeker's face as the man noted the bruises in Carlie's face, but he said soberly, "I reckon you're Nathan Meeker. This is Carlie Otis. She—"

Carlie giggled. For an instant both men stared at her. Then as if at a pre-arranged signal, all three burst into uproarious laughter. Reed choked, "Couldn't be the same door you two ran into. The marks are about the same, though."

A woman appeared in the doorway behind Meeker, a gray, motherly-appearing woman, and Meeker sobered, and said stiffly, "Come in. Come in. This is Mrs. Meeker, Mr.—uh—"

"Reed, Mrs. Meeker. Quentin Reed. And Mrs. Otis."

Mrs. Meeker's smile was gracious, and not disapproving, but it made Quentin wonder abruptly what had struck him so funny. He grunted awkwardly, "I'll tend to the horses," and turned away, relieved and wondering why.

He heard Mrs. Meeker clucking sympathetically over Carlie and Meeker's deep and somehow abashed voice as they went inside. Then he was away, down the lane, smelling the heavy, pleasant odor of hot, sunbaked corral, the sagebrush on the hillside, and the steamy, elusive fragrance of green, irrigated crops.

Chapter 4

REED, glancing about him at the orderliness of the Agency, felt a stirring of memory, and suddenly he placed this man, Nathan Meeker, in his mind. Newspapers had carried accounts of him, and once Reed had read a short biography in one of them. Meeker, a journalist on the *New York Tribune*, had come west at Horace Greeley's behest, and founded the colony of Greeley, north of Denver City. Most of Meeker's own resources had gone into the colony, but finally, all but destitute, he had accepted the position of Indian Agent for the Utes.

Reed threw down a couple forkfuls of hay to the corraled horses and walked slowly toward the rambling house. In the fields he could see overalled men, irrigating, and they were not Indians, but whites. Atop a shed, a hundred yards from the house, another laid poles side by side on an unfinished roof. Industrious was the word that occurred to Reed, and then, climbing the three steps to the long porch, he promptly forgot all this and thought of Carlie Otis, and knew then why he had not simply mounted up and continued southward as he had intended.

He knocked. Meeker answered the door, inviting him to enter in a voice that was deep and self-possessed, but which contained a certain unctuousness that was undoubtedly habitual.

The place was comfortably furnished, though the furniture had the appearance of having been handmade here at the Agency. The curtains at the windows had a bright and starched look. Carlie sat straight and prim beside the stone fireplace, and the domesticity of the setting became her. Across from her, also straight-backed, sat Mrs. Meeker, her expression outraged and angry.

"There was no justification for it whatever. Johnson simply attacked Nathan, and the other Indians laughed and made coarse jests."

Meeker smiled at Reed. "We're having a little trouble. I try to interest the Utes in farming and stock-raising, for I feel that only by learning to live as the whites do, can they expect to hold their own against the encroachment of the whites. But it's a hard row to hoe." Unexpectedly in this serious man, a glint of self-derision showed through the humor in his eyes. "Indians are like children. It requires a great deal of patience and firmness in handling them. I have the firmness, but not always the patience."

Reed had never bothered his head about Indians, had never considered the why and wherefore of their actions. They were simply a part of this western scene like cottonwoods or sagebrush. Nodding politely, he kept his glance on Carlie. Despite the bruises on her face, she had an oddly serene look, and she carried her soft womanliness like a banner.

Meeker said, "Mrs. Otis tells me you have acquired the freight line from Mr. Otis. I can't tell you how much it will mean to us to have someone reliable operating it. Not only do we depend entirely on it for our supplies here, but to the settlers along the road from here to Rawlins, it is one of life's necessities."

Reed spoke bluntly, irritated at Meeker's assumption that the line had been acquired legitimately, and at Carlie's half-smile. "I'm not sure I intend to stay. Did Mrs. Otis tell you how I acquired the line? I won it at poker. So it means nothing to me."

Carlie, sweetly smiling, interrupted. "Mr. Reed is trying to say that he has a faculty for becoming involved in local troubles and that he intends to avoid it here."

Meeker looked slightly puzzled for a moment, sensing the conflict between these two. Mrs. Meeker eased the tension by rising and saying, "It's time I thought about dinner. If you're ready, Mrs. Otis, I'll show you to your room. You must be tired after such a long ride."

As the women passed through the door, Meeker produced a single cigar and offered it to Reed. "I always envy men who can enjoy tobacco. Unfortunately, it makes me ill."

Reed grinned his thanks. He was beginning to like this serious but friendly man. The cigar was stale and dry, but he lighted it with every evidence of sincere enjoyment.

A shrill yell rose on the still air, fairly distant, and Meeker's face grew stern. Reed glanced at him questioningly.

"They're racing their ponies and gambling on the outcome. There's a spot of ground just the other side of that cornfield out there where they've had a racetrack for years. Instead of working and trying to improve their lot, they're content to hunt and gamble and sleep in the sun. I've been intending to plow up that racetrack, but so far Mrs. Meeker has talked me out of it. She claims it might be dangerous."

Reed murmured, "It might at that."

"I don't think so. These Indians like to bluff and strut and throw their weight around. But they're peaceful now."

"Everyone I saw today had a new Winchester repeating rifle. That doesn't look very peaceful."

Meeker made an impatient, angry gesture. "That's Otis for you! The man has no scruples whatever. And I know he's selling them whisky, too. Chief Johnson was drunk last night when he assaulted me. Yet there is no liquor here at the Agency, except certain medicinal supplies which are kept under lock and key."

"How come Johnson jumped you?"

"The whole tribe is angry because the annuity goods haven't arrived yet, and they were due two weeks ago. Johnson used that as his excuse, but he must know it isn't my fault. It is Otis who operates the freight line. If it weren't such a terrible thing, I'd say that Otis is deliberately delaying the annuity goods. Two years ago, he failed altogether to deliver them. The Indians were suffering from the cold, and finally the braves set out for Rawlins to bring the stuff back themselves. They were refused access to the stores in Rawlins and never did get them. They rotted in the Union Pacific warehouse until spring when the government billed the railroad for spoilage."

"What has Otis to gain by making the Indians resentful?"

"That's what puzzles me, Mr. Reed, that's what puzzles me. I can't understand it. Otis is a peculiar, vicious man. Perhaps

he feels that unrest among the Utes will make a better market for rifles and whisky."

He stared thoughtfully out the window for a moment and then he said earnestly, "I hope you will decide to stay and operate this freight line."

Reed felt a growing sense of being trapped. Stubbornly he said, "I don't know. I'll have to think about that."

He shook his head impatiently, rising. A fight was a certainty if he took over Otis' freight line. A fight for survival. For he remembered too well the look of vicious hatred that had been in Otis' eyes for him. And now, Otis had more reason than ever to hate him. Carlie was that reason.

Nervousness roiled him and he felt the pressure building inside his head. He could not help but sympathize with Meeker's position, and he appreciated the man's sincere earnestness, his real desire to better the lot of his red-skinned charges. Reed wanted to help, if he could. Too, he knew what living on the frontier was without supplies and the little things that contact with civilization could mean, occupational dressgoods for the women, factory-made ammunition, farm implements. Yet so many times before had he found himself an outcast, a man apart, that inside of him he shrank from again putting himself in the same position.

At dinner Reed met Josephine Meeker, a tall, serious and rather homely girl, and Mrs. Price, a pretty woman in her late twenties or early thirties. He made an effort to be polite, but it occurred to him that his moroseness and the inward turning of his thoughts were making the Meekers and Carlie, as well, uneasy. He could not know that they were glimpsing the steel in him, the knife-edge of unbridled power. He made a tall, loose shape there at the cloth-covered table, clad in travel-stained rider's clothes, a stubble of black beard on his lean and deeply tanned face, yet he had none of the awkward self-consciousness which the average puncher would feel in the same situation.

Carlie Otis may have noticed this, for her glances at him held frank speculation, and the smiling mockery of a while ago was gone. Seeing no solution for the problem that plagued him, Reed was thankful at the end of the meal when Meeker said, "Would you care to take a walk around and see what

we have done?" Reed nodded gratefully, glad of the chance to forget his need to make a decision for a while, although he was aware he had little time to do so. Before too long, Otis would be arriving in search of his wife and the man who had taken her away. When that time came, the decision would be out of Reed's hands.

Respect for Meeker grew as they walked slowly about the Agency and Meeker pointed out things which had been done, things which would be done. As they walked, Reed searched his mind for the flaw in Meeker's thinking, finding it at last with the thought, "He's acting as though he were a teacher of schoolchildren. He's forgetting the fact that these are grown men with a heritage of fighting, hunting, gambling and racing. It will take years and generations for that to be bred out of them." Then again the uneasiness touched Reed, as though some inner consciousness told him, "If he pushes them too far, they'll be dangerous."

Afternoon slid smoothly away into evening, and as the sun sank toward the horizon, enlarging itself and turning a copper red, Meeker produced a couple of willow rods from a shed, and the two went to the river, dropped in their lines and lay back against the sodded bank. Reed could feel the peacefulness stealing over him and a sort of drowsy contentment. Drifting was fine, but all places were the same to a stranger, faintly hostile, and a man made no friends if he moved on before he had a chance to become properly acquainted. Reed closed his eyes. It seemed only a moment, and then Meeker was gently shaking his shoulder. Reed sat up, startled. Meeker said, "You must have been very tired."

Reed grinned. "Catch any fish?" he asked.

Meeker shook his head. "I never bait my hook. The pole is just an excuse to steal a few moments here on the river bank. The noise of the water is restful." Nostalgia filmed the man's eyes and softened his expression. Reed said, "I remember a place like this. I used to fish there when I was a kid."

Meeker nodded. "It's the attraction the river holds for me, too. Takes me back to when life was simple and uncomplicated. Escape, perhaps, but escape is good for people once in a while."

Walking slowly back toward the house, Reed was harassed by awareness that tonight he would have to decide once and for all whether it was to be fish or cut bait. Memory of all the other times, when he had ridden alone from a place after he had shown the kind of men he was, was strong in him and he was feeling the bitter loneliness of a man who has not yet found his particular niche.

Grateful for the gloom of half-dusk, he told Meeker abruptly, "I'll be riding on tonight. I've got no right to ask a favor of you, but I wish you'd look after Mrs. Otis." Reed had the words to explain his reasons for leaving, but as they formed on his tongue, they sounded silly, vain and egotistical. You don't say to a man, "I can't stay because I'm such a hell of a fighter that I can't stay out of trouble."

Reed sensed the curiosity in Nathan Meeker, but courtesy apparently restrained the man's questions. He only murmured, "A man must make his own decisions. But I'm sorry to see you go. You might have helped tremendously here."

In silence then they came to the house. Conversation at supper was carried chiefly by Mrs. Meeker and Josephine, and centered on domestic matters, dressgoods, memories of the cities of the east and civilization. Carlie Otis, subdued, as though sensing from Reed's manner that his decision was made and was unfavorable, could not, however, avoid his glances throughout the meal. When her eyes met his, he regretted his decision and looked quickly away, feeling his resolve melting.

Immediately upon conclusion of the meal, Reed excused himself and headed for the corral to saddle his horse. Coming back, leading the animal, he saw Carlie approaching him in the dim half-light from the house windows and open door. She was walking swiftly, as though fearing he might already have left. Light from behind silhouetted her figure, but her face was dark and her expression hidden. Seeing Reed materialize out of the blackness, she stopped short and gave a small gasp. "I was afraid—I thought you were gone."

"I was coming back to say good-bye."

"You're going then." Her voice had a dull and hopeless sound.

Reed was silent. Suddenly Carlie stepped close to him.

He could smell the clean, woman fragrance of her as she said, "Please don't go. Please."

He steeled himself against her, with the full belief that now she would use herself, her woman power, to hold him here. She stood a yard away, not coming closer, saying, "It's hard for a woman to beg."

He began to talk. As his words tumbled out, they gained force, and all of the old anger and resentment was on him. "Do you know why I'm leaving? Because if I stay, you'll end up looking at me as though I were some sort of crawling thing. Hell, it's happened before. The trouble with me is that when I get into a fight, I go a little crazy. I don't fight like other men. Whole hog or none, that's me. You'd see me like that just once, and you wouldn't like it. I'm leaving because I don't want to see that look in your eyes."

She laid a timid hand on his arm. Her eyes were large and soft and glistened with her tears. "You're bitter and angry. I'm sorry, Quentin."

The pleading seemed to have gone out of her. The urge to gather her small body into his arms was strong, and tenderness for her was an overwhelming emotion. Suddenly the barrier between them was down because it was forgotten in the selflessness of their feeling for each other. Carlie swayed a little, and Reed stepped toward her.

He started violently as a harsh laugh issued from the darkness. Carlie cried out her surprise. Reed swung toward the sound.

"Pretty cozy, ain't it? Steal a man's wife jist t' play with her a while!" The voice grew venomous, addressing Carlie. "You little bitch! Get away from him so I can kill him!"

Chapter 5

CARLIE reacted instantaneously. But instead of doing as Otis commanded, she flung herself at Reed, trying to shield him.

His own action was hardly slower. He caught her as she came and threw her to the ground, hating this necessary roughness. But with Otis out there, unseen, there was no time to be gentle. Then he dove aside himself, feeling the walnut grips of his gun, feeling the weapon lift. Flame laced the darkness as Otis fired, the report making an ugly, chattering sound as it echoed back from the buildings that surrounded them.

Reed checked himself, checked his immediate impulse to return the fire. Instead, chilled with consuming rage, he shoved the gun back into its holster, and launched himself at the gun flash, twenty-five feet away. It crossed his mind briefly that Otis' unwonted bravery must have its cause, either in the darkness that shrouded him, or in the presence of Colorow nearby. Then he was on the man and there was no thought in him at all except to tear Otis' gun from his grasp and fling it aside.

Brave, foolish Nathan Meeker, having heard the shot, came to the door with a lamp in his hand. Hearing the straining sounds of conflict, he ran down the path, light streaming before him. Timidly, calling to him to be cautious, Mrs. Meeker followed, and behind her, Josephine and Mrs. Price, and all the male personnel of the Agency who were within earshot.

Reed only knew that there was light with which to fight, and was grateful, for a fumbling fight in the darkness is an invitation to treachery, to cold steel in the hand of a man who would not care how he killed. Even through the rage

that was on him, Reed knew he could not, dared not, kill this man. For in the eyes of the world, Otis would be a man wronged, betrayed.

Reed's fist crashed against Otis' mouth, felt the full lips turn to pulp, felt the sharpness of the teeth, and came away bleeding and cut to the bone. He took Otis' frantic blows, letting them fall where they would, not feeling them at all, except as jars that shook him clear to his heels. The sound of a woman crying came through the roaring in his ears. He seemed to hear the dull, sodden sounds of fists against flesh, and thought he was back at Otis' store, listening as Otis beat his wife.

But the sounds of fists against flesh were the sounds of his own fists, slogging into Otis' pulpy face, into his hard, tough stomach. Otis went down, and Reed was on him like a wolf, fists working rhythmically, slashing, cutting every time they hit.

Reed stopped and got to his feet groggily. Bruised about the face, his clothing torn and dusty, he hunched there panting for a moment.

Awareness that he had an audience came to him with a sort of physical sickness. He would not look at them. He was afraid to see the expressions their faces would hold for him. When he could breathe normally, when he could speak without panting, he said slowly, "I'm sorry. But he would have killed me. He tried."

Meeker said, "When you are rested, come in. Your face and hands need attention badly," and he turned, his wife and the others following closely behind.

Reed stood in the cool, concealing darkness. Then her voice came to him, soft, not condemning, nor hating, "Quentin."

Gratitude and relief flooded him, to be replaced almost immediately by a harshness that showed itself in his voice. "You've seen it now," he said roughly. "Well, go on back to the house! I'll ride out. You won't see me again."

He turned, remembering his horse but not knowing where to look for the animal. The silence was broken, broken by Carlie's soft sobbing. His words were pleading, "Don't do that! For God's sake, don't do that. Isn't it bad enough already?"

The crying stopped. He could feel her presence still, but did not know exactly where she stood. A match flared. She said firmly, wiping ineffectually at her tears with one hand. "Look at me. Do you see what you expect to see?"

Pity was there, pity for his bruises that showed now in the feeble light. What else was it? Admiration? Excitement? The flame turned blue, and went out, and Carlie's retreating footsteps ran along the path. The house door opened and closed, and Reed was alone.

A few moments he hesitated. His horse whinnied down beside the corral, and automatically he moved in that direction. Pain now laced through him, and his hand began to turn numb. He stuck a foot into the stirrup and half rose to the saddle, but he dropped back again, and slipped off saddle and bridle, throwing them against the fence. This was a decision that inevitably he had to make. The hand was dealt. He'd play it out.

Three men, one carrying a lantern, came from the house, located the inert body of Otis and carried him back. Reed walked to the river and stuck his hand into its cool depths. Pain made him suck breath sharply between his teeth. When it eased a little, he washed his face and rising, dried it with his bandanna. He dusted off his clothes and, feeling only a little more presentable, headed for the house.

Meeker had bandages, a burning antiseptic, and curved needle and thread ready for him. He stitched up the knuckle, bound it tightly. He applied antiseptic to the cuts on Reed's face, seeming to get a certain satisfaction from Reed's pain. His disapproval was very apparent.

Reed said, "Get your mind straight on one thing, right now. There is nothing either Mrs. Otis or myself need feel ashamed of."

Meeker looked as though he'd been caught with his hand in the jam. "I didn't say—" he began.

"No, but you're thinking it." Reed stared at Meeker until the man dropped his eyes. Meeker got up.

Reed said, "I've changed my mind. I'll stay and run the damned freight line."

Meeker turned and looked at him, a long stare, specula-

tive and puzzled. Reed knew he was trying to decide the motive which had changed his mind. Reed grinned inwardly. Meeker would never guess it, for even Reed could not say exactly what had changed him. A combination of things. He shrugged painfully as Meeker went out.

He could hear the measured, unctuous voice in the kitchen, and Otis' frequent growls of pain. He lay back in his chair, exhaustion fighting with his will to stay awake. He heard Meeker's voice, "There! You're patched up as well as I can patch you. Now get out! Get out of this house, off the Reservation, and stay off! If I see you again, I'll arrest you and send you to Rawlins under guard."

Otis snarled something unintelligible, and Reed heard a door slam. Meeker came back into the room. "There was a certain injustice in what I just did. After all, he is her husband."

"And that gives him the right to curse her, to beat her like he would a dog?"

Meeker shook his head. "Nothing gives a man that right."

Distantly and suddenly, they heard a series of shrill cries, a volley of shots, and finally, rapidly galloping hoofs. Unease and quick fear crossed Meeker's face. Reed leaped to the table, blowing out the lamp. Meeker barred the door in darkness, stumbled over a table in his haste. He called loudly toward the rear of the house, "Blow out the lamps, and bar the doors!"

Horses thundered to the steps of the porch, and a voice bellowed, "Open up in there! The damn Injuns is chasin' us!"

Meeker threw open the door, and men tumbled from their horses, and bunched in the doorway. One calmly took a stance in the darkest corner of the porch and checked the load in his rifle, waiting. Meeker, seeing this, said sharply, "There will be no shooting from this porch! Come in, all of you. I'll send for Chief Douglass and find out what this is all about."

He called into the darkness, speaking the Ute tongue. Though there was no movement or sound out there, none of these men had any doubt that his words had been heard.

Inside again, with the door closed, and the blinds drawn, he lighted the lamp. The group which had ridden in numbered five, and appeared to be mostly miners. One of them, the one who had stationed himself at a corner of the porch, looked like a plainsman, and wore buckskins and a wide-brimmed hat. Another, a tall man with cool gray eyes, and a full, rusty beard, said, "I'm Tom Beecham, Sheriff of Grand County. I got a warrant fer an Injun named Chinaman, fer murderin' a settler in Middle Park."

The plainsman growled, "You'll play hell servin' it, brother, it looks to me like."

The sheriff said, "Shut up, Elliott."

Meeker was again the courteous host. "Sit down, gentlemen. Make yourselves at home. I'll see that some supper is prepared for you." He went toward the kitchen.

Now all of the men began to talk at once. "Lordy, I'm sure glad t' git here. I thought them Injuns 'd git us sure." "Gawd, there musta been twenty of 'em." And, "What in hell made 'em jump us fer, anyway?"

A heavy hand rapped twice on the stout door. One of the men said nervously, "Who in hell's that?"

Elliott grinned. "Why don't yuh go see?"

"Not me. I seen enough Injuns fer one night."

Reed murmured, "I'll go," and rose, but Meeker came from the kitchen at that moment, and threw open the door.

The Ute standing there hardly looked like a chief. He was dressed in soiled blue overalls, badly fitting and baggy. On his head he wore a ragged straw hat. His skin was so dark, that for a moment, Reed thought he was a Negro. But the smears of red paint gave him away. He was outrageously bowlegged.

Meeker said courteously, "Come in, Chief Douglass. Come in."

The Ute entered, and gingerly sat down in a straight-backed chair. Meeker said, "Let me see the warrant, Sheriff."

He read it through in silence. Then he spoke to Douglass. "This paper says that Chinaman murdered a white man. It is your duty to give Chinaman up to the sheriff."

Douglass said haltingly, "Chinaman not on Reservation."

"Where is he?"

"I don' know."

"Then you must send a party of Utes with the sheriff to help him find Chinaman. Chinaman has broken the white man's law."

Douglass plucked a straw from his ragged hat-brim and traced idly on the knee of his overalls, staring down at the floor.

Meeker said impatiently, "Well?"

Douglass looked up. He was scowling blackly, and his eyes burned treacherously in their deep sockets. There was a venom and a hate in his eyes that was unnerving. The Ute growled, "No!" and rose.

Meeker looked helplessly at Sheriff Beecham. The sheriff rumbled, "By God, I'll learn that damn Paiute somethin'!" He stepped toward Douglass.

Meeker caught him by the arm. Douglass gave the sheriff a scornful glance, walked to the door, and outside in silence.

A shiver ran unexpectedly down Reed's spine. The air and the black night outside seemed charged with menace.

Weariness and pain kept Reed glued to his chair, dozing fitfully, as the sheriff and his party ate. While Meeker showed the posse to the quarters they would occupy for the night, Elliott came in and sat down across from Reed. His eyes were pale blue, crinkled at the corners with wry good humor. "Hear you won Otis' wagons at poker, son."

Reed nodded. Elliott said, "You'll git a stiff neck lookin' over your shoulder if you try to run that outfit. Reckon you know that, though."

Again Reed nodded, grinning faintly.

"Otis put them bruises on you?"

Reed laughed aloud at the man's friendly audaciousness. Elliott grinning widely now, said, "Them wagons'll all be burned an' the hosses gone if you wait fer mornin' t' go git 'em."

Reed said, "All right. I'll go tonight."

Elliott stood up, satisfaction plain in his leathery face. He was a small man, scarcely five feet six, Reed now saw with

surprise. But he had a vigor and a quiet assuredness that made you forget his small stature. Now he murmured, "I'll go with you. I guess the sheriff don't need me t' show him how t' git back t' Steamboat Springs. Besides, I'd kinda like t' see what Otis' face looks like."

Reed got up, grimacing at the movement. Elliott looked him up and down, but oddly enough, Reed felt no anger. He was beginning to experience a curious warmth. He felt Elliott's approval, and he basked in it. Elliott said, "You're gittin' a reputation as a fightin' man, son. Fust Colorow, then Jack, now Otis. Who you fixin' to tackle next?"

Reed growled, "You, if you don't shut up." He was marveling at the information this Elliott seemed to possess. How had he gotten it, in so short a time? Elliott answered his unasked question. "I was talkin' t' your lady, I mean Mrs. Otis."

Reed followed Elliott out of the room to the porch. The moon was rising in the east, magnified by the atmosphere, and turned golden yellow by dust and smoke in the air. The air was soft, but it had a certain smoky crispness that gently warned of coming winter. The door opened behind him. Elliott took off his hat, ducking his head, and Reed knew without turning that Carlie stood there.

Elliott murmured, "Evenin', ma'am," and to Reed, "I'll ketch your hoss fer you." He disappeared swiftly into the night.

Reed turned, and this quick movement brought torture to his bruised muscles. Carlie's eyes were shining, her lips gently smiling. "You're staying," she said.

Reed nodded, absorbing the beauty of her.

"Why?" she asked, and Reed smiled. She was woman enough to want to hear him say, "Because of you." He said it.

She moved out of the light from the doorway, down the long, vine-covered porch.

He followed, and gently drawing her close, he said, "I'm going north tonight. Promise me you won't go back to him." The thought of her going back maddened him. He repeated harshly, "Promise me!"

"I won't go back."

He gripped her shoulders, and his fingers bit deeper than he intended. "I'll think of something. I guess I love you, Carlie. I—" He whirled and strode from the porch, his thoughts seething.

Men had faced this problem from time immemorial, and how did they solve it? By killing, by kidnaping, by divorce? All of these had an ugly sound in Reed's mind. For a desire so overpoweringly sweet and tender, there should be some decent solution.

Elliott called from the corral, "Here, son," and Reed found his horse and swung up. As they rode past the house, he glanced at the empty porch, wishing she had stayed to wave. A movement near the steps caught his eye, and he paused for a moment, watching. An Indian girl mounted the porch, and knocked softly. Meeker's form was silhouetted in the doorway, there were a few words exchanged, and the Indian girl entered. "Who's that?" he asked Elliott.

"Piah. Otis' sweetie. Wonder what the hell she wants."

Reed shrugged. He could not see the road, but Elliott rode surely and without hesitation. Once he called back over his shoulder, "They's Injuns all around us. I kin sense 'em. But act like nothin' was wrong. Mebbe they'll let us through."

Later, when they were climbing toward Yellow Jacket Pass, Elliott called again, "Whew! Glad that's over. Makes my scalp itch, feelin' 'em all around like that. They're about half-hostile, half-peaceful. When they're like that, a man don't quite know how to handle 'em."

They made camp a mile short of Otis' post, and a quarter mile off the road. Elliott said, as he settled himself on the ground, "We ought t' hit Otis' place about daybreak. That way you'll stand a chance of gittin' some of them wagons an' hosses."

Reed drowsed, but Elliott talked softly on, reminiscing pointlessly, but revealing much of his history to Reed. The last of his words that Reed heard had the quality of words heard in a dream. "I remember onct in the Sioux country. Took a fancy t' an Injun gal. Purty little thing. Knew I couldn't have her, but the more I thought about it, the more I wanted her. Got so I couldn't think of nothin' else. Well,

when I didn't figure I could stand it no more, I jist slipped in one night an' took her. We was sure happy, 'till the small-pox took her. I always reckoned if a man knows what he wants, by God he better grab it, fer he'll always be sorry if he don't."

Chapter 6

DAWN CAME, gray and dripping with heavy dew, and in its first, uncertain light, Reed and Elliott slipped afoot down the slope behind the trading post. Both were aware that sight of Reed might well cause Otis to open up on them with his rifle, so Reed stayed out of sight behind the corner of the building, while Elliott knocked loudly and bellowed, "Roll out, damn it! I need some ca'tridges an' I can't wait all day."

Otis stumbled to the door, groggy and half-awake, in a poisonous temper. "Someday I'll kill you for that, you god-damned runt!"

Elliott snickered. "Holy mackerel," he said, staring admiringly at Otis' face. "How come you're still alive?"

Otis glared and started to slam the door, but the muzzle of Elliott's rifle lifted and nudged gently at his midriff. "All right, Reed," he called softly. Reed came from behind the corner, and lifted Otis' gun from its holster, punched the shells out into the palm of his hand, and returned it.

Otis mouthed obscenities, until Elliott jabbed him viciously with the rifle muzzle. "Shut up."

Reed was shocked at the man's condition. His nose was a mashed and bulbous pulp, and would heal up flat and broken. One ear was torn half away, and had been sewed back by Meeker's none-too-skillful hand. The silky spade beard was matted with dried blood. Both eyes were black and swollen, and Otis peered out through the slits with difficulty.

"Reed's after his wagons an' teams. S'pose you come with us an' turn 'em over to him." Elliott prodded Otis ahead of him toward the corrals. While Elliott and Otis watched, Reed caught up the horses, harnessed a part of them, and tied the others in a long string, the lead rope of each tied to the tail of the horse directly ahead of him. Three wagons only were at

the post. Reed hitched four horses apiece to two of the wagons, and hooked the other trailer-fashion behind the one he was to drive. The string of extra horses he tied behind this trailing wagon, and shouting at the horses, lined this strange-looking cavalcade out on the road, heading north. Elliott climbed up on the seat of the lead wagon, with a parting caution, "Think twice afore you foller us throwin' lead, brother."

Otis scowled, but the scowl was not so black as it should have been and there was a secret satisfaction in the man's slitted eyes. Elliott roared at his teams, and clattered down the road toward Milk River. Turning to look back, Reed saw Otis hobbling hastily toward the post building.

The very ease with which this had been accomplished filled him with foreboding. Elliott apparently had the same feeling, for his head swiveled constantly as his eyes searched out the brush lining the road, and the rifle stayed cradled across his knees. Jolting and making a racket that could be heard half a mile, they rolled down the long, twisting grade, using brakes often. Half a mile below the post, they picked up their tied saddle horses where they had been left, and these they tied behind Elliott's lead wagon.

Exhilaration touched Reed, for he was in the middle of this thing now. A fight in prospect had a way of exciting him. He was certain now that the fight with Otis last night was in no way conclusive. There would be more. Otis had been stricken twice in twenty-four hours at the very core of his existence, his pride.

This line of thought brought Carlie to his mind, and the exhilaration evaporated abruptly. A frustrated and angry feeling assailed him, but as he drove, this feeling was tempered by memory of her sweetness. Not often given to imaginings, he now let himself dwell upon what might be if there were no Otis, if the way were clear for Carlie and him. He almost wished they had not worked so cagily back at the post this morning. If Otis had been given an opportunity to draw—No, damn it! That was no solution. If he killed Otis that way, always there would be a wall of doubt between him and Carlie, with each wondering whether Otis was killed because he was in the way, or strictly in self-defense.

Reed stirred impatiently. He was unwillingly placed in the position of trying to keep Otis alive. Desiring Otis' death so much, he knew he could never be entirely sure of his own motives should he happen to kill the man.

Near noon, with the sun high and blazing hot, they wound dustily through a small, ridge-encircled basin and out of it, to glimpse the wide valley of Milk River below. Autumn had touched this land with its magic, and the oakbrush was brilliant yellow, the sarvus, orange and tinted with red. The grass in the flat below was golden, waving in the wind like tall, uncut wheat, and the spruce, in this sea of gold around them, made islands of deep, cool green.

A herd of elk, grazing the flat below, suddenly took frantic flight, leaving a path of destruction in the grass behind them. Elliott straightened, and stopped his wagon. Squinting, straining his eyes against the glare, Reed examined the landscape.

Then he saw it. Coming down the road at the opposite side of the valley, from the left, came a string of four loaded wagons, and now the hoarse yells of the teamsters were audible in the clear air. Elliott grunted, "Twasn't them wagons that spooked the elk."

Tension built in Reed, and an unreal feeling of being a spectator at a play. The wagons paused at the ford across Milk River while the horses watered sparingly. They continued again, with much shouting and cursing, following the twin track-trails through the waving grass.

The elk had run, not away from the wagons, but toward them, then cutting out of the valley and taking to the timber. Reed spoke sharply, "My God, man, we can't just sit here!"

Elliott growled, "Wait. There might be half a hundred Injuns down there. This is why Otis looked like a cat lappin' cream. This is his way o' gittin' back at you, son. If there ain't more'n a few Injuns we'll be more help t' them fellers if the Injuns don't know we're here. Anyhow, let's see what happens afore we stick our necks out."

There was logic in Elliott's reasoning, but Reed was not a logical fighter. He said sharply, "To hell with that! Those are my wagons down there." He leaped off the wagon seat, untied his gray from Elliott's wagon and swung into the saddle.

Elliott, muttering, followed suit, but galloping down the road, he was a hundred yards behind the younger man.

Reed cut across the switchbacks in the road, plunging down the steep, rocky and brush-grown slope recklessly. While he was yet a mile from the wagon train, and still unseen by either Utes or teamsters, the Indians broke cover and descended, howling and firing on the vulnerable wagon train.

Reed had the fleeting thought, "This is it. Now all hell will break loose." He was aware that up to now, the Ute raids had been half-hearted and spasmodic things, and the few killings in the past summer had been more accidental than deliberate. But this, this raid by a score of braves, this was something that would bring the cavalry on the run. The Utes must know it, and must be ready for the cavalry.

Reed slipped his rifle from the saddle boot, levered a cartridge into the chamber. Four hundred yards from the now circling wagons, he threw it to his shoulder and fired, levered rapidly and fired again. Shots from this unexpected quarter threw the Utes into confusion. For a moment they milled uncertainly. It was a deadly moment for them.

The teamsters had operated in Indian country too long not to know exactly what to do. They had circled their wagons immediately the Indians had broken cover. Now they were behind and under the wagons, rifles in hand, pouring a destructive and accurate fire into the bunching braves. Two, three, four, toppled from their saddles.

Reed heard Elliott's rifle boom out behind him, and a horse fell, screaming and kicking, the Ute's leg pinned beneath him. A teamster's rifle cracked, and the Indian lay still.

Reed shoved the rifle back into the boot, empty, and drew his Colt. Wildness ripped through him, and the flaring heat of battle was in his eyes. He rode directly for the wagons and the confused Utes. He raised his gun, aiming as deliberately as the smoothly-galloping motion of the horse would allow, and fired.

Elliott's gun boomed out again. The teamsters, snatching this chance to turn the tide, levered their rifles as swiftly as they could. Abruptly the Utes scattered, reaching timber in a matter of seconds, bending low over the necks of their ponies.

Their abortive raid had been expensive. Five riderless ponies moved skittishly through the grass, and a sixth lay on the ground, still pinning his lifeless rider down.

An ugly, powerfully-built man with a closely-cropped head of graying hair strode out from the wagons, and stuck out his hand as Reed swung down. "Goddammit, man, you couldn't have timed that better."

Reed took the hand, grinning. "Pure selfishness," he said. "These are my wagons."

Elliott was dismounting. He said hoarsely, his calm unruffled, "This here's your new boss. Won the outfit at poker."

Reed asked, "What you loaded with?"

"Gewgaws fer the Injuns. Annuity goods."

There was grim irony in that, but Reed did not find it humorous. Six Utes were killed trying to take that which already belonged to them. Reed was thinking of Carlie, back there at the Agency, defended by a handful of farmers, most of whom had never held a gun.

He threw Elliott a panicky, questioning look. Elliott said, "All right, son. I'll git fer the Army post in Rawlins. You hightail it on back t' the Agency. She jist might need you. But don't try it alone. Them fifteen braves that's left ain't goin' t' be too fond of you fer a while." He swung into his saddle, raised a hand and was gone, loping easily. His horse was fresh. Reed calculated the time it would take him, the time it would take the cavalry to return. He muttered, "Three, four days. Maybe more."

Urgency swung him around sharply. He could take these men, leave the wagons, and save perhaps a day in the trip back to the Agency. But if this was not yet a full-blown uprising, the annuity goods might well halt it in time. He barked, "All right! Let's go! I got three empty wagons and fresh horses a mile back on the road. If the Indians haven't burned them, we'll spread this stuff out, have lighter loaded wagons and fresh horses."

A man said, "Hell, I ain't goin' no fu'ther."

For an instant Reed stood utterly still. A cold tenseness crept over him. He swung to face the man. He said, "You aren't freighting in town now, mister. Out here a man doesn't quit in the middle of his run." The loss of this one man

would matter little. But if this one were allowed to leave, there would be others to follow him, and Reed would be left here alone, unable to move these wagons, unable to even try and avert disaster at White River Agency by delivering the annuity goods.

Belligerence turned the man's mouth sullen; his stubbornness and defiance were plain and defensive. He snarled, "I'm quittin'. I'm headin' north. Think you can stop me, Buster?"

Reed laughed shortly, and the light of battle was a sudden glitter in his eyes. "Do I think I can stop you? Hell, I know I can!"

Moving while he was yet speaking, he lashed out, a vicious left sinking deep into the other's mid-section, a right following, uppercutting. Pain shot clear to his shoulder as his bandaged fist caught the man's cheekbone, high, near the eye.

A growl went up among the assembled teamsters, four besides the ugly one. Reed advanced, feeling the old, wild abandon, not even trying to control it now. He hammered the man back, drove him against the wheel of a wagon and pounded him until he slumped beside it. Then he turned. "Load him!" he said harshly. "By God, you're all going on with the wagons, that way or on your feet. It's up to you."

Mitchell, the ugly one, said, "I'm goin'. Figgered to right along. But I don't like to be pushed, mister. When this is over, I aim to find out how tough you really are."

Reed grinned.

With a minimum of confusion, the wagons strung out along the road. Winding ever upward, Reed chafed at the slowness of their travel. Halfway to the empty wagons, he heard a volley of shots from that direction, and saw a plume of rising smoke.

He kicked the gray off the road, forced him to scramble up the way he had come down half an hour before. Spurring mercilessly, feeling already the hopelessness of his haste, he had a sudden mind picture of heavy, brutal Colorow laying a dirty hand on Carlie. He yanked his horse in, bitter futility lashing him, and the certain knowledge that he would be no help to Carlie if he got himself killed playing the Ute's game.

When the wagons caught up with him, the teamster he had knocked out was conscious and leering viciously from

the seat of one of the wagons. "Lose your nerve, Buster?"

Reed growled, "Shut up!" his mind finding no adequate answer to the jibe. He'd gain nothing by fighting with these men, he knew. What he had done back on the flat was necessary. And Reed was certain now that his only chance of helping Carlie and the others at the Agency lay with these men. One man alone would be helpless against the whole Ute nation.

But inaction was gall in his mouth. Every nerve in his body was screaming by the time they reached the smoldering and gutted remains of the wagons he had brought this morning from Otis' trading post.

The horses, eighteen in all, lay dead in their traces, and lined out behind the wagons on the ground, halters still tied to the tails of the horses immediately preceding them. Reed flushed and began to tremble, but slowly he quieted as he realized how deadly this thing had become. Nerve and quiet courage he needed now, and above all, enough judgment to stay out of their goading traps.

Chapter 7

THEY NOONED at the site of the gutted wagons, which was a spot where brush was short and scattered, and where there was little cover. Reed, who had eaten no breakfast, was ravenous. Mitchell, his grinning, high-cheekboned face frighteningly ugly, handed Reed a tin cup of inky coffee, and a plate loaded with a venison stew he had prepared the night before.

"If a man has to live this kind of life," he growled in his rasping voice, "By God, he might as well eat. These jiggers make fun of me for the cookin' outfit I pack along, but I notice they go for the grub when it's dished out."

"How long you been with this outfit?" Reed asked him.

"Since spring. I drifted in from Utah."

Reed asked, "What'd I win when I won this outfit?"

"You won a hell of a sight of trouble. We ain't had a day go by but what we lose an hour to four hours with a broken-down wagon. Otis loads 'em too heavy an' he won't spend a dime on repairs."

Reed said, "I'll change that. I'll get some new wagons."

"Buy some feed for the hosses while you're at it. They need grain an' plenty of it, pullin' loads like this."

"Where's the rest of the wagons?"

Mitchell gave a harsh, bitter laugh. "Litterin' a lot in Rawlins. Ain't a one of 'em will travel. Broken axles, broken wheels, broken beds."

Reed smiled ruefully. So this was what he had stayed for. This and the war party out there in the timber, licking their wounds and waiting for another chance. No, by God! It wasn't the freight line that held him here. It was a pair of violet eyes, a singularly compelling face surrounded by hair

of gleaming gold. It was a woman, alive and worth fighting for.

He scrubbed out his plate with sand and stowed it, together with the tin cup in the box bolted to the side of Mitchell's wagon. Mitchell and the others followed suit, and within five minutes, they were strung out again, laboring up the hard pull toward Yellow Jacket Pass.

The flaming beauty of this land was a stimulant to Reed's blood. It seemed incredible that behind lay half a dozen Utes, killed by violence not an hour before. It was hard to believe that even now, the White River Indian Agency might be under attack. The pull was strong against Reed to quit this crawling cavalcade, spur southward. He could reach the Agency, traveling hard, in early morning—if he reached it at all.

Convincing himself that this course would be pure folly, he dropped back beside Mitchell's wagon, which was second in line. "Otis didn't strike me as a man who'd pass up a chance to make a dollar. Why you figure he let this line go to hell?"

"Couldn't only be one thing—somethin' bigger takin' up his time."

"Like what?"

"How in hell should I know? I just drive a wagon."

"The store?"

"Hell, no! That's little stuff, too." Mitchell stared hard at Reed for a moment. Then he said frankly, "I like you some better than I do Otis. He wanted me to go into somethin' with him two-three months ago. Somethin' big, he said, but wouldn't say what."

Reed murmured thoughtfully, "What's big in this country? What's that big?"

"Land mebbe, if the Utes didn't own it."

Reed shook his head. "Too far-fetched. Otis is practical."

They were entering a narrow defile, brushy sloped, and full of sharp turns so that a man driving the rear wagon could seldom see the lead wagon. Here, in spots, the road had been blasted out of solid rock, and was narrow and treacherous.

Reed breathed, "Cattle! By God, that's it!"

Mitchell said, "Huh?"

Reed said, "There's over a thousand head of cattle at White River Agency. They're worth maybe thirty dollars a head. Thirty thousand dollars is a lot of money."

"Hell, man, them cattle belong to Uncle Sam. Even Otis wouldn't—" But doubt crept into Mitchell's face.

Reed argued, "Who in hell would know it? Uncle Sam's going to be too busy with Utes for a while to worry about cattle. When he finds out they're gone, he'll probably figure the Utes took them."

He did not hear Mitchell's reply. The road narrowed dangerously, forcing him to drop behind. Mitchell's wagon ground over the solid rock ledge with a thunderous racket.

The appalling enormity of Otis' plan was slow in impressing itself on Reed's mind. How could a man, even one like Otis, be vicious enough, brutally callous enough, to let hundreds die so that he could enrich himself? He shook his head. No, it must be something else.

Something struck him a numbing blow on his right shoulder. The instantaneous thought that it was a dislodged rock was dispelled almost before it formed by the echoing crack of a rifle. Reed put a hand to his shoulder, and it came away wet and sticky with blood.

Now a fusillade of shots racketed out ahead and he could hear the screaming, rearing and fighting of the lead wagon's teams. Mitchell half stood up, turned, amazement and tearing pain in his face. He clutched at a bloody bulge in his shirt above his waist with both hands. A bullet had seared his abdominal wall, opening it along a six-inch path and it was his intestines that caused the bulge. Reed, pinned neatly between two wagons, could do nothing but try to control his plunging horse. At his right, the mountainside was precipitous and far too steep to climb. At his left, a drop of fifteen feet to the bed of Yellow Jacket Creek made an impossible jump for a horse.

Mitchell, seeing the thing that had happened to him, began to retch, and contracting muscles made him moan with pain. Mitchell's horses piled up against the lead wagon. With their driver unable to control them, they crowded and fought. Reed started to leap from his horse to the wagon, but checked him-

self when he saw he was already too late. He yelled, "Mitchell! Get off that wagon, for Christ's sake!"

One horse of Mitchell's lead team was off the edge, his weight dragging his partner after him. The second team clawed at the rough rock road, trying to back, but they were tangled in their harness, off balance, and Mitch could not help them with the brake.

Reed dragged his rifle from the boot, leveled it and killed the inside horse of the second team. The animal dropped in his tracks, but there was now too much weight pulling his body toward the edge. Slowly, with an inevitability that was frightening, the wagon slid forward toward the edge and tipped. At the last moment, Reed spurred alongside, leaned from the saddle, and dragged Mitch clear. The wagon disappeared, and split seconds later made a crash of splintering hardwood as it struck the rocky bed of the creek.

Reed was off his horse now, dragging Mitch toward the shelter of a jutting rock at the side of the road. The Utes had set up a road-block ahead, had ambushed the wagons neatly, but even they could not shoot around a bend in the road. Mitch was sweating and pale, but his eyes were clear. "The dirty bastards! Look what they done to me!"

Reed said, "Take it easy for a minute. I'll be back." He left the teamster and crawled under the lead wagon, rifle poking ahead of him. A glance over his shoulder told him that the drivers of the other two wagons had their teams under control. The horses stood patiently, heads drooping, already having lost interest in the smell of blood and dust and violence, and concerned only with these few moments of precious rest. The extra man, leaving the one Reed had whipped on the seat of his wagon, came crawling after Reed, his face sweaty and green with fear. Reed felt a stir of admiration. It is one thing to face something of which you have no fear, quite another to force yourself forward when your insides are churning with craven panic.

Both teams, those which had drawn the lead wagon, lay dead, killed in the first, furious burst of fire. "A Ute trick," the extra man murmured behind Reed. "Kill your horses and pin you down."

Sheltered behind the down horses, Reed took a long five

minutes to scrutinize the road ahead, the hillsides, and the creek-bed. Nothing moved; no sound marred the stillness. He raised his head and then stood up.

The extra man said, "Get down, you fool!"

Reed said heavily, "They're gone. But we haven't seen the last of them."

It took a long hour to clear the road. Reed set the men at the task of rolling horses over the edge, cutting away harness, and then he went back to Mitchell. The man was unconscious. Reed found some clean muslin in the lead wagon, and bound it tightly around Mitchell's middle. The flow of blood was slow and sluggish, but he noted with concern that one of Mitchell's intestines was ruptured.

Mitchell roused as he was finishing, asking, "What happened to Jeffries?"

"The man driving the lead wagon?"

Mitch nodded.

"He's dead. We'll take him with us, and bury him tonight."

Mitch looked at Reed's blood-soaked sleeve. "You caught one, too, huh?"

Reed had forgotten his own wound. Now he remembered the increasing weakness that had been slowly stealing over him, the lack of strength in his left arm. He peeled off his shirt, feeling helpless anger and resentment that this should happen to him just now, when he needed his strength the most. He knelt and said, "Look at it. Missed the bone, didn't it?"

Mitch touched the flesh around the wound gently. "Passed on through. You'll be all right if it don't fester." Reed tore strips from the bolt of muslin and bound around the wound, up over the shoulder. There was pain in the shoulder now, plenty of it.

The teamsters came back. The extra man, Robson, asked, "What you want to do with this wagon? Push it over?"

Reed nodded. They turned the tongue, and let the wagon roll backwards over the edge, making no effort to salvage the load of annuity goods it contained.

Reed helped Robson lift Mitchell to the top of one of the wagons, after first making a bed of bright cotton blankets there.

Mitchell gave him a wry grin. "I'm travelin' like a god-damned Injun king."

The two remaining wagons rolled on, grinding and clattering toward, Reed knew, the next planned ambush. Yet what else could they do? If they retreated toward Rawlins, they would be pursued, particularly now, after the Utes found out what they were hauling by ransacking the two wrecked wagons.

The afternoon grew hot. Reed rode in the lead, feeling that he owed them at least this, to place himself in the position to draw the first fire.

The two wagons crawled toward the pass, blue with haze in the distance. The first round of this running fight had definitely gone to Reed and his teamsters. The second and third had gone to the Utes. How would the next one go? Would the Utes now draw away, or would they keep pecking at the wagons until the last man was killed?

Reed rode with nervous alertness, his eyes searching every bit of cover, rummaging through the brush and timber that lined the road. Briefly he wondered about Elliott, more lingeringly and with stabbing terror, about Carlie. Was this a general uprising, or only an isolated raid which the Utes had been persuaded to pull off by Otis?

Tonight they would reach Otis' trading post. There they would find shelter, medical supplies to dress their wounds, and a measure of safety. No matter how much Otis hated Reed, he could hardly refuse them sanctuary, especially those who had recently been in his employ. If he did refuse—Reed's mouth thinned out dangerously.

It took all of his will power to keep from thinking of Carlie, for he knew that if he allowed himself to dwell upon what might be happening to her, he would bolt, would quit the wagons and race on alone. He realized also, however, that he was no match for these Indians in cunning. They would track him down, ambush and kill him.

The sun slowly dropped toward the horizon. Reed rode down a sudden, short pitch in the road and entered a thicket of willows. He abruptly remembered this particular spot, for it was only two nights ago that he had ridden into Otis' post through this same thicket of willows. Amazement touched

him and he was suddenly aware of how much had happened in the last forty-eight hours. Then he was out of the willows, wary, but fully unprepared for the sight that confronted him.

All that was left of Otis' trading post was a rubble pile of blackened timbers. The corrals were untouched, as were one or two small sheds. Smoke still rose from the store, eddying wisps that drifted southward toward the pass. Reed dismounted and toed around in the hot ashes, looking for human remains. He thrust angrily away from him a hot excitement that was shaming and degrading. Mitch grinned wanly down from his high pile of blankets. He said, "It'd serve the bastard right if he was murdered by the same lousy Injuns he's been stirrin' up."

Reed shook his head. "Nobody was killed here." Puzzlement and a sense that something was wrong oppressed him. Otis had tremendous influence with Colorow, and undoubtedly with some of the lesser chiefs as well. Why then had they burned him out?

He spoke to the three waiting, fearful teamsters. "Make a triangle out of the two wagons and that shed over there. Turn the horses into the corral." He mounted and rode beside Mitch, looking down, feeling the weight of his own responsibility. "How you feeling?"

"All right." But there was no conviction in the man.

"Liar."

Mitch nodded and his face turned sombre. "Sure I am. A man can't live long with his guts hangin' out. No use in me fooling myself."

"Meeker's a good hand at patching a man up. You'll be all right when we get you there."

The shed made an excellent shelter for Mitch. The wagons made bulwarks against attack. A fire was built in the center, and coffee made, the last of the venison stew heated. Reed said, "We'll pull out at moonrise. Indians don't like night-fighting."

Half an hour later, hearing the sound of galloping hoofs, Reed stamped out the fire hastily. The others crowded to the southern side of their small compound to peer into the darkness. A lone rider, dimly seen, pounded to the faintly glowing

remains of the post. His voice was panicky and openly resentful. "Otis! Goddammit, Otis, where in hell are you?"

Reed called, "Over here, friend. Come over here."

The man whirled his horse and galloped this short distance, nearly overrunning the wagons. He fell from his horse, crawled through the narrow space between them and pitched headlong right into the hot ashes of the fire. Reed sprang to roll him clear. The man, a boy really, Reed saw now, murmured weakly, "Meeker sent me fer troops. Who're you?"

Reed yanked him to a sitting position. "Talk, man, talk! Is everything all right there?" His voice rose, and its very desperation seemed to rouse the man.

"Awright so far. I—" He went into a fit of coughing, and then weakly slumped back. Reed struck a match. Red froth covered the man's lips and part of his shirt front. Lower, the shirt was dark with blood. Reed dropped his ear to the man's chest. Then he straightened. "Dead," he said.

Robson groaned. "Christ! Oh, Christ!"

Reed went into the shed and struck another match. Mitchell seemed weaker, but he grinned, an ugly, forced grimace. "Guess I'll have to admit you're tougher than me. Won't git a chance to prove you're not."

Reed said tiredly, "I don't feel tough." The match burned his fingers and he dropped it. In darkness he continued, "You hang on. We'll travel at moonrise, and by morning we'll have you at the Agency." He backed slowly out of the shed, wishing he could believe his own words. He spoke into the darkness. "Get shovels out of the wagons. We'll bury Jeffries right here. Then maybe the Indians won't find the grave."

By the time the task was finished, there was still no glow on the eastern horizon. Two of the teamsters stretched out on the ground, but Robson continued to peer nervously into the darkness. Reed put his back against a wagon wheel and rolled a cigarette.

The eastern sky slowly took on a faint, yellow glow. Vague excitement stirred in him as he thought of Carlie and the brief moments they had known together. He'd see her soon—very soon. He rose abruptly. "Get ready. The moon will be up in a few minutes." He caught Robson by the arm and drew him into the shed. "Help me load Mitch."

He struck a match. There was an odd stillness in the way Mitchell lay. Reed said, "Mitch. We're going now."

He dropped the match, stepped on it, saying, "He's out. Take his feet and we'll pick him up."

But when his hand encountered Mitch's flesh he drew it back abruptly. There was a coolness about the man, a clammy coolness that could mean only one thing. Now, with Mitch gone, the fury returned to Reed, fury that swept over him in waves, turning his face hot, bringing new strength to his weakened body. He left the shed.

Thinking of Mitchell and suddenly aware that he had no right to command these men further when their lives were at stake, he said, "I'm going on. Now. But none of you need come with me unless you want to. The cavalry will be through here in about two more days. If you can hold out until then . . ."

There was silence that stretched and lasted, and finally Reed said impatiently, "Well?"

Robson spoke. "I'll go if you figure you need me. But it looks like it'd be smarter to stay fortified up."

The others growled their assent. Reed said, "All right. Good luck." He slid between the wagons and walked toward the corral. Five minutes later, he was mounted and walking the animal carefully down the road, every nerve strung tight, every sense awake. Around him was silence, shadowed, ominous silence.

Chapter 8

CARLIE OTIS wakened at daybreak, and stared about her with wide, frightened eyes for several moments before she remembered that she was no longer at home, but at White River Agency. Her instinctive wariness left her. The events of the past night came flooding to her mind. Firstly she recalled the coolness both Meeker and his wife had displayed toward her as she bade them good-night. This memory brought a wave of color to her face.

Then she thought of Quentin Reed, tall, ruthless and savage, but surprisingly gentle toward her. Considering this gentleness and the reason for it, she smiled and lay back, stretching luxuriously between the clean, cotton sheets. Carlie heard a stir of activity in the kitchen. Suddenly aware that her position here, while technically that of a guest, demanded that she pitch in, she jumped out of bed. Rapidly, and shivering in the chill room, she dressed, put up her hair, and then opened the door. She hesitated on the threshold. Today a whole new life opened up for her. Excitement set up a trembling in her. Meeker had sent Otis away. If she so desired, she need never see him again.

She hurried into the kitchen, and with a somewhat shy, "Good morning," began helping with the breakfast preparation. Food preparation was a sizable job here. There were eight men to be fed, four women, and Mrs. Price's two small children. There were always travelers, to whom Meeker invariably extended his generous hospitality. This morning, as guests, there were Sheriff Beecham and his posse.

Oddly enough, Carlie was not troubled by fear for Reed's safety, although she knew he was headed for Otis' trading post to claim his wagons and horses. Carlie was aware that

Otis would like nothing better than a chance to kill Reed, yet so strong was the confidence Reed had inspired in her that she felt no great concern. She had a simple and unquestioning faith in Reed's ability to take care of himself. And in a week or two, he would be back, perhaps with some plan that would mean they could be together for always.

At breakfast, Meeker was glum and worried. He cautioned the sheriff twice in nearly the same words, "Ride openly and slowly until you reach the other side of Yellow Jacket Pass. Show them no fear. Above all, don't open fire, even if they should stop you. Another month, and they will quiet down, for the winter will be here. But at the moment, nothing, nothing at all must happen to cause bloodshed."

The sheriff appeared to be in agreement with Meeker's suggestion, but Carlie thought she detected in his eyes a reservation, and she was sure he was thinking, "They won't catch Tom Beecham unawares. Meeker or no Meeker, Tom Beecham's goin' t' git back t' Steamboat Springs with his hair on."

After breakfast there was no loafing over coffee at the table. Beecham and his men hurried to the corral, and just after seven, rode off up the road in a tightly compact group. Meeker watched until they were out of sight, and then turned. Carlie was standing with Mrs. Meeker and Josephine on the porch. Meeker said, "I've made up my mind. Today, we'll plow up that racetrack. I think it's time we stopped letting the Utes dictate our actions. Every day we let them frighten us, bully us, turn us from our lawful purpose, to try and civilize them, we are a peg lower in their esteem. If they cease to respect us, then we had better just give up and return back home."

Carlie started to protest, but stopped abruptly, realizing that it was certainly not her place to advise this man. Mrs. Meeker said, "Please, Nathan. Don't do anything hastily. Wait."

Meeker's long, solemn face turned stern and stubborn. "I have considered it carefully, and I feel it must be done. If there is no place for them to loaf and gamble, perhaps they will listen to me and go to work in the fields. Do you realize,

Mother, that we have been here a year and a half, and have accomplished practically nothing?"

Mrs. Meeker looked at him for a moment, then apparently satisfied by the stubborn set of his jaw that she could not dissuade him, she sighed. "All right, Nathan. You must do what you think is best."

She turned and entered the house, with Josephine and Carlie following. Meeker strode off toward the corrals, obviously to give the order to plow the Utes' racetrack. Carlie could not dispel the strong feeling of uneasiness that stole over her. At first she attributed this uneasiness to the action Meeker was about to take. She was puzzled. What had so suddenly decided Meeker on this course, especially right now? She wondered if the Indian girl who had come to see Meeker last night had anything to do with his decision.

As she stood over the enormous dishpan, washing the breakfast dishes, her uneasiness grew. Perhaps something had happened to Reed.

Sudden, panicky terror came over her. A dish dropped from her hands and clattered to the floor. Josephine Meeker, drying the dishes beside her, said, "Why, Mrs. Otis! What's the matter? You look ill."

"Nothing. Nothing. I—"

"Here. Let me finish that. You sit down. So much excitement. It's been too much for you."

"No. I'm all right." Resolutely, she continued with her work. She longed to confide in Josephine, but already she had brought enough disapproval down upon herself, and she hesitated to increase it.

Too, Carlie had been so long without the company of other women that she was inclined to be shy and reserved in their presence. "You've been awfully good to me," she said. "I'll never forget it."

"Pooh. We've done nothing; nothing at all."

A wagon clattered past the house, loaded with two walking plows, and behind it plodded an extra team. Carlie heard Meeker's voice, "I'll be out directly. I have a little paperwork to do first."

He came through the kitchen, smiling, and in high spirits,

as though his decisiveness this morning had lifted a large part of the worry from him.

Against her will, Carlie yielded to Josephine's insistence that she lie down for an hour when the dishes were done. She was grateful for the older girl's concern. It had been long since anyone had fussed over her well-being, and it gave her a comforting, warm feeling.

She could not lie idly on the bed for long, however, and after a few short moments, she got up nervously and stood at the window. A strange foreboding pervaded her thoughts, and her mind darted frantically about, trying to rationalize this overpowering uneasiness.

Suddenly, far out across the field she heard a faint report, and immediately following it a whole volley of them, like a string of firecrackers exploding. Running feet pounded through the house.

Carlie stood frozen momentarily, then she ran to her door, through the house and outside. Indecisiveness and quick fear held the women, Meeker, and the others in a tight knot on the porch. Mrs. Meeker said, her voice small and uncontrolled, "Oh, Nathan! I knew you shouldn't—" She seemed to catch herself, to realize that her attitude was unbecoming at a time like this. She touched his arm, murmuring, "I'm sorry, Nathan."

Carlie, who had never seen Meeker angry, saw him so now. His face had grown excessively white. His jaws clenched and unclenched with his effort to control himself. His eyes had narrowed, were chill and wild. "Horses!" he thundered. "Saddle some horses! Quickly!"

Mrs. Meeker said strongly, "Josephine, go get your father a gun."

Meeker shouted, "No! Certainly not!" over his shoulder as he ran toward the corrals.

Minutes later he thundered from the corral at the head of a group of four thoroughly frightened men, men to whom violence was a stranger.

Carlie, while fear ran through her for their safety, admired their courage. There was fear here, but there was no whimpering. Mrs. Meeker turned decisively toward the house, say-

ing, "We must be ready for them. Mrs. Price, will you put water on to boil, please? Josephine, bring bandages." She went into the depths of the house and returned shortly carrying a bottle of whisky, which she set down gingerly on a nearby table, saying, "It is the only anesthetic we have."

Carlie felt helpless and useless. She touched Mrs. Meeker gently on the arm. "Perhaps it is not so bad as that," and drew an apologetic smile from the older woman.

"I have seen this coming," Mrs. Meeker told her softly but in an incredulous tone that belied her words. "I have told myself I was imagining things. But the signs are plain enough for anyone to read. First Nathan is attacked by Chief Johnson. Next, the sheriff is fired upon. Now this."

A feeling of unreality came over Carlie. She forced herself to quiet, feeling hysteria rising within her.

The moments ran slowly on, each woman living with her own private fears. They did not hear the horses until they were nearly to the porch steps, for the animals were slowly walking. Meeker's face was a terrible thing, torn with grief, rage, and self-reproach. Across his saddle, steadied by the man behind, dangled the inert body of one of the plowmen, Schwartz by name, an elderly bachelor who had been shyly friendly.

The second plowman rode third in the cavalcade, face contorted with pain, and a red stain spreading from a darkish hole in one of his thighs. Meeker and the others went to him, helped him gently from the saddle, up the porch steps and into the house. Mrs. Meeker and the other women took over. Carlie watched with a compelling fascination as the men returned outside and eased the body of the dead man down, carried it to the porch. Josephine came with a clean sheet and her father took it from her, carefully covering the dead man where he lay. Meeker spoke to the men below the steps, saying in a voice that was barely audible to Carlie, "I blame myself for this. I should never have ordered the racetrack plowed. I allowed myself to be persuaded last night by an Indian girl." He seemed bemused. "It sounded very logical at the time."

The expressions of the men facing him held no condemnation, only an apathetic animal fear, a bewildered incredulity.

Meeker went on, "I must ask one of you to ride to Rawlins to summon troops. For myself I would never request them, but I have a responsibility to the rest of you. Will one of you volunteer?"

For a moment a sort of sick shame washed over Carlie, this moment when silence became heavy and unbearable. But it was not a lack of courage that held these men silent, but only their bewildered failure to comprehend this sudden and startling turn of events. When Meeker's words penetrated their thoughts, they spoke, raggedly, but enough as one man to make Carlie's spine tingle with pleasure and strange pride.

From the group, Meeker selected one, a young man whom he called Ben. "Take that roan mare," he said. "She's the best we have. Ride down the river for four or five miles, and then cut back into the hills to the north. If you keep bearing east, slowly, you cannot help but strike the road before long."

Carlie stepped onto the porch. "Wait a moment," she said. "You will need food." She ran into the kitchen, snatching meat and bread and tumbling the lot into a towel which she knotted securely in a bundle. She carried it out, smiling as the young man tied it hastily behind his saddle, seeing him only as a very frightened boy and wanting to say something which would comfort the raw edges of his nerves.

Her mind could think of nothing, but as he swung up, her heart spoke for her. "You are a very brave young man," she said.

He flushed, and spurred the mare. He thundered around the house and down the road that led westward. "God permit him to get through safely," someone said behind her, and it was Meeker's voice, turned tense and strange.

The day was a nightmare, and would have dragged endlessly but for the busily humming activity which Meeker ordered and supervised. Guns and ammunition were brought and left, loaded, at windows throughout the house. Water was carried until every available vessel was filled, covered and ready for the siege that was sure to come. Food was brought from the storehouses and piled high in the kitchen.

The strangest thing of all this day was the total lack of any

belligerent show by the Utes. All during the long day, no member of the embattled household glimpsed a single Indian. Yet not one of them doubted that they were under constant surveillance. It was a feeling that kept you always alert, always conscious that you were being watched.

Carlie's mind froze itself, and would not think of Reed at all. Yet there was always in her consciousness this brooding terror, this consuming fear that hung unrecognized in the back of her thoughts. Occasionally she would stop what she was doing, shudder violently, stand for a moment while she fought for control. Always, grimly and growing paler, she would go on. When dusk fell and surcease from their nagging fear came with Meeker's words, "I think we will have until morning," her eyes were large and haunted, and shadowed with weariness.

"They seldom fight at night, unless they are attacked." These were words that relaxed. But they could not stop Carlie's thoughts.

Quiet seemed to pervade the house. To the east, a glow lighted the horizon, forecasting an early rising moon. Carlie smiled faintly, for in some way she felt she had caught the thought emanations from Reed, a dozen miles away. At this moment he sat with his back to the wagon wheel, thinking of her and smiling.

With a murderous whoop a Ute dashed toward the house, brandishing a lighted torch in one hand, a Winchester in the other. Before Carlie could rush to the window, the yard was filled with yelling, painted savages. Their clothes, she saw, had been discarded for breech-clouts, and their bodies were greased and painted. Their faces, also painted, were contorted with mob-madness.

Thoroughly frightened, Carlie ran into the living room. Meeker, pity for her terror in his eyes, caught her in his arms. "There. There. It's only a war dance. We are safe for tonight. Go back to your room and sleep." Death, standing beside him, took some of the uncompromising sternness from him, gave him an understanding he had never had before. "Quentin Reed is a brave man, my dear. I'd stake my life that wherever he is, he's fighting, trying to reach you."

With a strangled sob, Carlie turned and stumbled along the way to her room. All she could do now was pray, and this she did, incoherently and silently. But she could not sleep until long after the Utes had ceased their savage dance. All through the long night she whimpered and stirred uneasily in her sleep.

Chapter 9

DAVE ANDERSON was forty and a bachelor. His shoulders were huge and his arms long. His back was rounded and bent, his legs short and slightly bowed. Dave was a farmer, not a fighter. He had, for the past week, been regretting fiercely the impulse which had made him take employment in this God-forsaken wilderness. He longed for the quiet safety of the Wisconsin farm where he had been working before he took this job.

When, at four o'clock, this morning of September 29th, Meeker asked for another volunteer to ride to Rawlins, apparently uneasy in his mind about the first messenger, Dave volunteered at once, vowing to himself that when the ride was complete and the message delivered, he would forthwith get on the train and head east.

Meeker wrote a note to the commander at Fort Fred Steele, Major Thornburg, and Dave stumbled through the darkness to the corral, found his horse and mounted. Behind his saddle he had provisions enough for three days, a slicker and a tight bed-roll.

Dave had no doubt that he was doing the right thing. He had a hunch these Indians meant business. This mission gave him a chance to escape, an honorable chance and one which would not be censured. But it gave a man an eerie feeling, riding out alone into Indian country. Dave touched the old Navy Colt at his side for assurance. Meeker had showed him how to fire the thing, but he hoped he wouldn't need it.

Instead of turning west, Dave struck out directly north into the shaly, steep hills. He had a notion that by so doing he would avoid the concentration of Indians in the valley, and thus possibly escape detection entirely.

He had been traveling for perhaps an hour when he began

to feel uneasy. There was nothing tangible which made him so. This was just a feeling, but it was almost as though someone were watching him. He nudged the gelding with the heels of his heavy workshoes. He calculated the time he had left the Agency to be four-thirty. It must be about five now. A glance eastward told him his calculations were very nearly correct. Already the sky was paling.

Now he could see enough of the country to guide the horse himself, where previously he had let the animal pick his own way, controlling him only enough to keep him headed in a general northeasterly direction.

At the top of a small rise, he reined in, critically studying the country ahead with a view to choosing the easiest course. Sharply in the still air a twig cracked behind him. He whirled, hand flashing awkwardly to the gun. For a full minute he sat listening, while unaccustomed chills coursed down his back.

"A deer," he muttered, not enough of a woodsman to know that had it been a deer the noise would have come from the front, or the side, but never directly behind.

He went on, giggling the horse every hundred yards ineffectually, this action more a reflex and a desire for haste than a real command. As he traveled Dave noticed an increasing nervousness in the horse. The animal's head swiveled from right to left, and the ears circled, pointing now ahead, now turning to listen to sounds, inaudible to Dave, behind.

The sky turned ever lighter, graying coldly at first, gradually assuming a pale blue color. The sun was laying its first golden rays on the highest peaks when Dave saw his first Indian. The Ute, naked and skinny, rode across a clearing on Dave's right, moving along a course which would intercept Dave's if he continued. He bore right, into heavy timber, not stopping, but feeling an increase of the tension within himself.

The sun was warm on his back, dispelling the chill of dawn, when Dave abruptly realized that the timber about him was oddly silent. At this time of morning, there should be birds fluttering about, the sounds of small animals, scurrying and hunting for food. Dave felt a cold touch of panic. Fighting the impulse to spur the horse into a mad run, he reined in, an-

grily trying to still the small sounds the horse made with his breathing, his fidgeting, so that he could listen.

"Just lemme git out of this damn country. Just lemme git out," he whispered. He started the horse on again. He saw his second Indian then, sitting atop a ridge off to his left a quarter of a mile. The brave was naked, painted, and showed no awareness of Dave's presence.

A crashing sound behind him, this time loud and continuing as if some huge animal pounded heedlessly through the timber, drove Dave off his horse, gun in hand, a cold sweat bathing his body. He put the horse between himself and the sound, peering over the animal's withers with wide and panicked eyes.

Ahead on the trail he had been following, which was now behind him, he heard a long, "Ahhhh." He whirled and fired recklessly, the pistol making a vicious thunder of noise in the still wilderness.

Complete silence answered the echoes. Apparently he had fired at nothing. He was letting his nerves get him. With a shaky laugh, he mounted, but now he put the horse into a run. Pounding along, he suddenly realized that by his frightened foolishness he had undoubtedly started a pursuit where before there had been nothing except his own overly active imagination. The two braves he had seen could hardly avoid having heard the shots. They would investigate and would find his trail. He spurred harder, now terror-ridden and without thought other than escape.

His horse, tripping, plunged to his knees, throwing Dave clear, and then rolled, narrowly missing the man with his thrashing hindquarters.

Dave was stunned. He crawled back along the trail to get away from the horse which struggled to rise, but could not because of a broken foreleg. The horse had become turned around, and as Dave crawled, gasping and choking for wind knocked out of his lungs by the fall, the horse's struggles carried him back along the trail after Dave in a ghastly pursuit.

Dave tried to rise, and as he did so, his hand encountered a rope. He pulled himself upright, using the rope for support. For a full minute he stared down stupidly at the rope,

stretched wire-tight between two trees about fifteen inches above the ground.

As his mind comprehended the significance of the rope, something akin to madness flared in his eyes. His face worked spasmodically, turning an ash gray. Dave had often watched the huge Agency tomcat, amused at its cruelty, as it worried a chipmunk to death. Now he had the chipmunk's view. The Utes were all around him. They could kill him with a single shot whenever they chose. But with savage cruelty they preferred to play with him a while, to let him sweat, to watch him break.

Dave got to his feet and walked past the horse, along the trail. When he had gone around the first bend, he broke into a run. He heard the shot that killed his horse before he had run a hundred yards. He speeded up. His breath came in ragged sobs. His chest hurt terribly. His legs felt like leaden weights and he stumbled often. But still he ran.

Quentin Reed, holed up in a dense clump of sarvus brush high above him, watched the chase with raging, helpless eyes. "Dirty, cruel bastards!" he muttered. "Why don't they kill him and have it over with?" He had followed Dave's progress for over a mile, had seen what Dave could not, the Utes behind him, ahead of him, on both sides.

Quentin could not hear the sounds that had so alarmed Dave, but he had seen the rising panic in the man, had seen him shoot blindly into the timber. He cursed softly now, "Damn the fool! Why did he have to lead them this way?"

In Reed's mind, resentment at the new problem thus presented, was warring with his essential decency, his knowledge that fool or not, he was bound to try and help the man. Half a dozen times he told himself, "I'll be damned if I will. He got himself into this jam, let him get himself out of it."

He was fully aware that to show himself now, after a full night of slow and extremely cautious travel, was to lose everything he had gained, everything he hoped to accomplish. So far he was undetected by the Utes. With any luck, he might reach the Agency by noon.

As much as he tried, he could not put aside the knowledge that this was a white man, a man like himself who needed

help. "It's him or Carlie," he muttered savagely, but even as he did so, he was rising. What a man is, determines at last what that man will do. Reed found his horse, mounted and, keeping to the hidden slope of the hill he was on, spurred downward. He reached the bottom, turned right, dropped into a dry wash and hurried along it. If his calculations were right, a half mile in this general direction should bring him to within two or three hundred yards of the exhausted man. He slipped the Colt from its holster and thumbed a shell into the empty chamber under the hammer, giving no consideration now to the problem of how two men with only one horse, could escape a dozen well-mounted Utes.

Finally, sure that he was at least within rifle-shot of the man, he dismounted and slipped his carbine from the boot. He scaled the deep wall of the wash at a place where it was sloping and grassy, and peered over its rim.

What he saw made him jerk the rifle swiftly to his shoulder, fire, and fire again. But he was too late. The Ute bending over Dave Anderson had time to plunge the knife into Dave's heart before he died with Quentin's bullet in his head. Another Ute, aiming at Reed's head, died before he fired. No more than fifty feet away, they were, and as these two fell, five more broke out of the timber at the far edge of the clearing and raced toward the wash that concealed Reed and his horse.

Reed backed away from the rim, turned, and ran. He reached his horse and vaulted into the saddle. Some of his urgency communicated itself to the horse. This, combined with the animal's instinctive dislike of rifle fire, lent him speed. At the first spot where it was possible, Reed reined the horse out of the wash, glancing about sharply. A grin of triumph spread over his face. The Utes were now nearly a mile away. They had followed the wash south, quartering toward it, but Reed had ridden north. They saw him emerge, and their howls of disappointment were plainly audible, though muted and merged by distance.

"A short breather," thought Reed. "Nothing more."

The gray was panting hard and sweating on his neck. Reed dug his spurs without pity into the animal's sides and smiled grimly as the pace increased. It angered him to be running,

but the silly maxim, "He who fights and runs away, lives to fight another day," kept going inanely through his mind.

Three miles to the north a pinnacle of shaly rock rose from the golden, grassy hills, and it was toward this that he headed. Occasional, brief glances over his shoulder showed him how the lead he had was narrowing, showed him how many more Indians had joined the pursuit. His horse's sides ran red with blood, but still Reed raked him. "If you'd had more rest the last two days, or maybe a decent feed, you could run better," he muttered harshly, but his knowledge of the reason for the horse's weakness did not affect his treatment of the animal.

As the distance between him and his pursuers shortened, so did the distance to the high, rock pinnacle. "I'll be a sitting duck when I ride up that slope. But if I make it to the top, by God, I can make them pay for me!"

He relaxed now, riding easily, for he had gauged both the distance to the peak, and the speed of his pursuers, and had seen that he would make it if no other Utes rode out ahead to intercept him. As he neared the steep, loose slope, he could feel the strength of his horse rapidly running out. The gray was flecked with foam and his breath came in short, noisy gasps. His footing seemed less sure, and Reed tensed, waiting for him to stumble, waiting for him to fall, and wanting to be sure that when it happened, he would be alert enough to spring clear.

A small creek wound darkly through a grassy meadow at the foot of the peak, and Reed lifted the horse, sailed him over it.

Then he was on the slope, the horse scrambling, grunting enormously, heaving himself upward. Reed sat lightly in the saddle, doing all he could to help. Behind he heard the Utes' yells of triumph. Rifles cracked out and dust spurts began to blossom close beside him.

Plainly he heard the bullet that struck the horse, and he was out of the saddle almost before the gray stumbled, clawing onward, rifle in hand, toward the summit. The horse's thrashing sent the animal rolling toward the bottom, and with one part of his mind, Reed heard the pitiful sounds of the horse's dying.

It enraged him to be robbed of a horse he had grown to

know and to like. He paused for breath at a small outcropping of rock and laid such a withering fire among the Utes that they dived downward to the nearest cover and lay there, cautiously returning his fire in a half-hearted manner that told him of their certainty of ultimate victory.

When he was again breathing easily, Reed ran on, throwing himself to right and left to confuse their aim. They followed, shooting spasmodically, but they traveled more leisurely than he. His lead lengthened.

He was very near complete exhaustion when he reached the jagged and rock-strewn top of the butte, and fell full length on the rocky ground, gasping for air, sweating and crimson of face. For what seemed an eternity he lay still except for the heaving of his chest as it sucked air in, expelled it out.

Then he was up again, seeking out the best place in which to fort up, and when he found it, laying an accurate and carefully slow fire downward at the toiling Indians. For each of his first four shots a Ute fell, and then they were retreating, dragging their wounded clumsily after them.

The defeat, the exhaustion, the futility of the last twenty-four hours with everything now lost because of a useless gesture brought the yell, involuntarily from Reed's lips. "God damn you! I told you it'd cost you!" Afterward he felt silly and childish, as though he had been caught shaking his fist at God.

The sun grew hot and the day dragged on. The Utes made no further attempt to scale the bluff. Below him, Reed could see the dark small stream meandering across the grassy meadow, and further north, surprisingly, the road that led to the summit of Yellow Jacket Pass.

Thank God, Elliott had gotten away to Rawlins, for it now appeared that the Utes had killed both of Meeker's messengers. Briefly Reed concerned himself with the safety of the teamsters he had left at Otis' trading post last night, and then his thoughts went inevitably to Carlie with a pang of real, physical pain.

In Reed's mood of defeat and depression, even his certainty of Carlie grew less. He shook his head, trying to dispel his gloomy, defeated thoughts. Whatever her feelings for

him, he was sure of his own for her. But what was happening at the Agency? What if the Utes already had her.

They wouldn't kill her. They never killed women. But they made you wish they had. Only the bare possibility that there was a chance that she might still be safe at the Agency kept Reed from making a headlong and foolish charge down the slope in an effort to break through.

Never had Reed felt so helpless, so brutally tormented. And there was nothing, nothing at all he could do until night-fall. He settled himself to wait, and forced his mind through sheer will power, to inactivity. Thirst plagued him, as did the pangs of hunger. His eyes grew tired and burned from watching below him. The wound in his shoulder throbbed and he could feel some swelling under the bandage. There seemed no hope but he could not give up. Later, perhaps, when he was dead, but not now.

Chapter 10

IT WAS with a strange mixture of rage and satisfaction that Otis watched the wagons and trailing horses as they left the trading post and wound downward toward Milk River. He felt satisfaction because he had already provided a hot reception for the two at Milk River, rage because he would not be present to kill Quentin Reed himself.

He had slept very little the previous night. Pain from his beaten and bruised body had made it all but impossible. When even the sound of the wagons was no longer audible, he turned and went inside. Colorow had promised that there would be twenty braves at Milk River this morning, waiting for the wagons that were due there from Rawlins. It was a fortunate coincidence that they would be able to take care of Reed and Elliott at the same time.

He fried a couple of venison steaks and ate half a loaf of stale bread, thinking resentfully of Carlie as he did so. It was characteristic of him that he attached no blame to himself for the fact that Carlie had left him. He consoled himself instead with calling her vicious names under his breath.

When he finished eating, he heated water and bathed his face and beard, wincing with pain as the water touched the open cuts. Then he went out into the store proper, full of the knowledge of what he had to do to this place and hating the sight of everything he was about to destroy. There was five thousand dollars' worth of goods here. Five thousand dollars' worth that represented the greed of a lifetime. He had no choice but to put the torch to it. If he did not, there would be those who would say that Otis was the man behind the Ute rebellion. He could not afford that, nor could he afford to be investigated after this was over. For he would have in his possession a thousand head of Government cattle, cattle for

which he would have no bill of sale, no evidence of legal ownership except the brands they would be wearing.

As the morning wore on, Otis began to get impatient. Piah had promised to be here before noon, and she had arranged to bring with her three Indian boys, too young to be among the warriors, but old enough to ride, round up cattle, and later to help with the monumental task of rebranding them.

Twice, parties of braves, naked except for breech-clouts and painted for war, passed through the post with only sullen glances in Otis' direction. The fact that they all ignored him gave Otis increased confidence. It was obvious that Colorow had instructed them well. Otis was to be the only white man who could move safely through the Reservation from now on. Of course, for all Colorow's cooperation there had to be a price. The price was Carlie. Otis had promised the fat, scowling Ute that he would do nothing to help Carlie, would make no effort to rescue her. It was an unnecessary thing, this promise. Now, there was nobody who could help Carlie.

Close on the heels of the third war party, Piah rode in, the three Indian youths following close behind. Otis greeted her concern over his beaten face with surliness. He saddled his horse, set the three boys to driving the remuda he had corraled back toward White River.

He dumped a drum of coal oil inside the store, watching with rising doubt as the clear, oily liquid bubbled from the open bung.

Suppose something went wrong? Suppose he failed to pull off this huge cattle steal? He would have nothing, nothing at all. This store and these goods which were legally, if not honestly, acquired, would be gone. He shook his head impatiently. A gambler all his life, this was his biggest gamble. Five thousand dollars against thirty, no against a start that would make him rich. That was the goal he sought. Wealth. Fabulous wealth. A thousand cattle, properly managed, could in a few years make him one of the richest men in Colorado. He struck a match, flung it at the coal oil barrel.

Piah stood beside him, not watching the licking, growing flames, but watching his face. Her eyes held an expression of doglike worship. Otis, turning, saw it, and suddenly he hated her, hated her enough to want to kill her. But not yet.

Not until he was safely ensconced on the Utah desert with his cattle around him.

"Come on, damn it!" he grated irritably. "Let's get going. There's more to be done than standin' here watchin' this place burn down."

He looked back once after they had entered the timber, and he could see a black, billowing column of smoke. Irritability increased in him. Piah rode silently, squawlike, behind him. Only once did she speak, and then it was to say in her carefully precise English, "I went to see Mr. Meeker last night. He will plow the racetrack today."

Otis grunted. This news was vastly satisfying, for now the entire Ute nation would be behind Colorow and his young hotheads. The passing war parties this morning had been Colorow's bucks, but soon all the warriors would be on the move. There was one other logical conclusion that Otis reached regarding these braves heading north. The plan was made to destroy the Agency, and Colorow was aware that this would bring the cavalry. An ambush was being laid somewhere for that cavalry when it arrived.

At the river, they picked up nearly two hundred head of cattle which had been grazing in the meadow along the river. Otis now buckled down to business, leaving Piah and one of the boys to close-herd these, while he and the other two boys spurred their mounts eastward up the river. It would have to be a quick thing, this roundup, lasting no more than three days at most. Yet it must be timed so that he would not pass through the Agency until the murderous Utes were finished there.

Otis calculated mentally, knowing that the bulk of the cattle were here, above the Agency. "By tomorrow night it should be safe to take them through," he thought."

Straight up the river in a direct line they went, not halting until they were a full ten miles from their starting point. Now Otis put the Utes out on circle, holding the bunches they gathered in the river bottom, and gathering the brushy meadows and the nearby hillsides himself.

As he rode downriver, he noted that the small Ute villages were gone, the places where they had stood marked by rub-

bish, worn grass, and blackened piles where the fires had been. The cattle count kept mounting all day. At nightfall, Otis tallied two hundred and eighty head.

He put one of the Utes to night herding, and himself wolfed a couple of venison steaks from the hindquarter of a freshly killed buck.

Otis lay on the ground and drew his thin blankets over him. He wanted to sleep, but his plans kept running through his mind as he searched for flaws. Appearance. That was easy. No one in this country had ever seen him without a beard. When he shaved it off, he doubted if even Piah would know him. His name he would also change. Utah was a sparsely settled country. A man could establish a ranch there and the chances were no one would know it for a year or more. He would be talkative about his past, the past he had invented for himself. A Texas man, he would be, not a native, for he talked strictly Yankee. Let them get the idea he was a carpet-bagger. Believing this of him, they would look no further.

He lay still, smiling. He listened to the soft noise of the bedded herd and went to sleep, already a cattle king, with no thought at all of the hundreds of people who would die so that he could realize his dream.

Piah, nearly five miles further downriver, also lay in her blankets dreaming. While she worshipped the very boots Otis wore, she was not gullible enough nor stupid enough to believe that he loved her. He was using her, she well knew.

He was providing her escape, escape from the tribe, and its way of living. Piah had no desire to live out her life in a nomadic tepee. She had seen enough of the ways of the whites to want the same comfort and security for herself.

Later, when the cattle and she and Otis were safely in Utah, he would try to send her away, she well knew. She had planned far enough ahead to provide even for this eventuality. Blackmail. Polite and meek blackmail. She would tell him that unless he kept her, she would tell where he obtained his cattle. She was blissfully unaware that murder is an answer to blackmail.

She was up at dawn, riding up and down the river at a pace that would kill her horse if continued. She picked up nearly seventy head, watering in the river, and, before ten

o'clock, she added these to the bunch she was holding. In late afternoon, Otis rode in following a bawling herd of about three hundred and fifty head. That meant that already they had gathered over six hundred of the thousand. Between here and the Agency, they would pick up perhaps another three hundred, and maybe a hundred below there.

It was a hot, still night. Had Piah glanced to the westward, she would have seen a column of rising smoke, might even have seen a glow of red on the thinly drifting clouds.

Chapter 11

THERE ARE many ways to get the utmost from a horse. Elliott knew most of them. You have to be cruel and heartless. Above all, you have to know exactly how much is left, how much the animal has held back in reserve. Elliott had no intention of arriving at Fort Steele on a dying horse.

He alternated his pace, ten minutes at a walk, ten at a lope, a short breather, then ten minutes at a fast trot. Necessarily, he varied this routine according to the terrain he was traveling. Knowing this route well, he calculated his speed with reasonable accuracy at about six miles an hour. There were no doubts in him regarding the urgency of this ride. He had been observing the Utes for months, watching the successive signs of unrest, wondering all this while if they would be brought to a fighting pitch before the snows made a rebellion impossible.

It now appeared they had. He was quite sure that if the attack on the wagon train had been only an isolated incident, it would have been made by no more than three or four Utes. The very number of the attacking party was a give-away.

Sam Elliott was not the sort to allow himself the dubious luxury of worry about things which he could not change, and he did not let his mind dwell on what must surely be happening now all over the enormous Ute Reservation, along its borders, and in the settlements nearby.

He did, however, have his brief moment of worry about Sheriff Beecham and the posse, feeling his own responsibility in this matter keenly since he had undertaken to guide them. Considering the situation from all angles, he finally arrived at the conclusion that very likely the Utes would allow Beecham to go through unmolested. The Utes were not fanatical haters of all white men. They would usually weigh the chance

for gain against the probable danger before making an attack. In Beecham's case it was almost certain that their losses would outweigh their gains since the posse was well armed, nervous and determined, and carried nothing in the way of loot but their guns.

Traveling this way, eating sparingly in the saddle, drinking only when he paused to rest his horse, Elliott forded the North Fork of the Platte, came up the steep road that angled across the face of the bluff, and into Fort Steele at two in the afternoon on September 29th.

He nodded tiredly at the boyish-faced sentry that called to him to halt, and reined his horse obediently to a stop, weariness holding him immobile and robbing his brain of the sense of urgency it had carried so long. He said quietly in a voice that did not sound like his own, "Elliott's the name, son. I've a message for Major Thornburg."

The youthful trooper flushed at the term, "son," and hesitated. Without waiting for him to make up his mind, Elliott kicked the jaded horse and plodded on toward the headquarters building at the far end of the parade. A blue-clad officer, lifting his hat to his head, eyes narrowed against the glare, came onto the veranda and stared across at the approaching rider. Even at this distance there was something familiar about him, something that stirred the embers of dislike in Elliott.

Another officer, this one unmistakable at any distance up to half a mile, came onto the porch of his quarters on the south side of the parade. It was toward this man that Elliott abruptly wheeled his horse.

Major Thornburg made a tall and soldierly figure as he waited impatiently for Elliott to approach close enough for conversation. Elliott smiled a little, knowing that this man missed no detail of his appearance, gauged to a hair with one glance the strength left in both man and horse, and doubtless was forming conclusions as to Elliott's errand already.

Thornburg stood fully six-feet-four, was lean and spare, but in no way skinny. His hair and eyes were dark, his skin grained and tanned brownish red. Sideburns, dark and smooth, edged halfway down his long jaws. He smiled at Elliott, a brief and abrupt smile that held only a perfunctory warmth.

Out of a corner of his eye, Elliott noted the approach of the first officer he had seen. But he allowed himself to slip from the saddle and find the shade of the porch before he spoke. Dust caked thick on his face, in his eyes and throat. He felt if he grinned his face would crack. His voice, hoarse and reedy from disuse, broke from his throat. "Utes jumped the wagon train at Milk River yestiddy mornin'. Meeker's oneasy as hell. Looks like it'd take some of Uncle Sam's cavalry t' keep order down there."

Thornburg stepped back into his quarters, returned a moment later with a glass of water. Elliott gulped it thirstily. Then he told his story, tersely complete, and was finished before the captain stepped into earshot behind him. Unspoken antagonism became a sparking current between the two men. The captain saluted Thornburg. "Is this man from the Agency, sir?" he asked, making no attempt to conceal his hostility.

Thornburg said, "Captain Nison, Mr. Elliott." His sharp eyes noted the antagonism, but apparently he preferred to ignore it. He asked, directly of Elliott, "Does this look to you like a sporadic raid by a fistful of hotheads, or something else?"

Elliott shrugged. In his heart he knew the entire tribe was on the war-path. But the utter fatigue in him made him shrink from the polite and biting sarcasm a positive reply would earn from Captain Nison. He temporized, "Couldn't hardly know that without doin' a little scoutin'. Wasn't time fer that. Reckon a man better figure it's the whole tribe, though. If he does, he ain't goin' t' find hisself short-handed after it's too late t' do anythin' about it."

Thornburg frowned. Nison, his grin at Elliott an insult, said in his dry and rasping voice, "Twenty men could straighten those Utes out in a week, sir. Let me—"

Elliott interrupted, saying flatly in his softest tone, "Captain Nison is still a fool. Twenty men wouldn't last no longer than a snowball in hell." He met Nison's angry glance with his own coolly insolent stare. Then he said, putting no inflection whatever into his voice, "I'm dry an' hungry. I'll be in the sutler's store if you want me."

This was out of his hands and he had enough experience

with the Army to know that you neither hurried nor advised them. If the Army needed advice, they asked for it. Thornburg knew where he was. When he was through telegraphing for instructions, he'd send for Elliott. By then, Elliott hoped to have a square meal, a couple of stiff drinks and an hour's sleep under his belt.

Walking away, he overheard Nison's softly contemptuous words, "Damned whisky-guzzling drifters! That's what we have to depend on for guides!"

Sam Elliott thought angrily, "How does a bastard like that live through campaign after campaign while the good ones die?" and went on, remembering another time when he had ridden with Nison, then Lieutenant Nison, on a patrol in Sioux country.

He admitted that perhaps then there might have been some excuse for Nison's cocksure, contemptuous manner. Nison was young then. Now he should have enough experience to listen to advice from the civilians the Army hired to guide and advise.

Elliott grunted a single, obscene word, and entered the store. But he could not entirely drive Nison's smooth, unpleasantly sneering face from his thoughts, nor could he keep the biting memory of that one scout with Nison from running through his mind.

Nison's words, Lieutenant Nison's words, kept coming back, "Retreat? I'm not hired to retreat, mister. But you're a civilian. Crawl into an arroyo and hide, if you want."

After that there had been blood, acrid gunsmoke, screams from dying men. Where Elliott had known they'd be, over the next rise of ground, were ten times the warriors that stood in the open, daring the cavalry to fight. Fortuitously, a full regiment marching to relieve the fort's garrison, heard the ruckus and intervened, but not before Nison had lost over half his small command. Now, Nison hated him, probably blaming Elliott because rank had been withheld from him.

Well, the years pass. Some learn and some don't. A feeling of depression settled over Elliott. He had his two drinks, neat and fast, sitting at a table for his steak. Thornburg was a good officer. But there could be no doubt that Nison's counsel would have some weight. As a result, there would prob-

ably be fewer men in the column, there might be less vigilance, less haste.

The temptation to chuck the whole business grew strong in Elliott. But then he thought of Quentin Reed, savage, unpredictable, and likeable, of Carlie Otis, of Meeker, of all the others who were depending on him. He grew impatient for Thornburg's summons and ate in haste.

He'd have to do better than he had so far. He'd have to counteract Nison's negative advice. He'd have to go along, tired as he was, to give whatever counsel and assistance he could. Not given to hunches and premonitions, Elliott was nevertheless obscurely uneasy, and blamed this on fatigue and the unexpected presence of Captain Nison at the Fort.

Before he had quite finished his meal, but with the edge of his hunger gone, he rose, paid his score and left, shuffling rapidly through the deep dust toward the headquarters building.

About the post was a busily purposeful stir and a sort of tight expectancy. These were the preparations. Loaded wagons rumbled away from the L-shaped commissary and quartermaster storehouse, and the empties waited in a line before it. Troopers moved about the post on their busily obscure errands. Occasionally Elliott would hear a shout or a curse.

He found Thornburg at headquarters, Captain Nison and two other officers, unknown to Elliott, with him.

Nison glowered at Elliott and unaccountably this had a cheering effect on the scout. He grinned, feeling a quick, loose relaxation in his body. Thornburg darted a glance first at Nison, then a puzzled glance at Elliott. He said, "I'll take three troops of cavalry, a company of infantry, supplies for a month."

Better than two hundred men. Elliott suddenly regretted both his unfinished dinner and his lack of confidence in Thornburg. He might have known the major would have Nison's number by now. An army officer spends his life judging character. There are times when his life depends on his judgment.

Elliott nodded, grinned again at the furious Nison. He asked, "What time you leavin'?"

"Four o'clock." Thornburg walked to the door with Elliott.

On the porch he said, "Go over to my quarters and get some sleep. I'll have you called in plenty of time." He seemed on the point of saying something else, hesitated over it, and finally said, "Meeker's been in communication with me for some time. This isn't entirely a surprise."

Elliott knew the major was intensely interested in what lay between himself and Nison. He also knew the major would never ask. He said, "Thanks, Major," and stepped off the porch.

At four, the command wound out of the post, down the road to the Platte. Now began the march that became a nightmare of weariness to Sam Elliott almost at once, for the hour's sleep in Thornburg's quarters was all he'd had for two nights except for the short nap near Otis' trading post the night before last.

Thornburg wasted no time at this early stage of the journey. He kept the wagons moving steadily, providing them with a double crew, one sleeping and one driving. After providing for the infantry to be dropped in small detachments from Fortification Creek to the Agency, he left them behind, letting them move at their own slower pace. These small detachments of infantry would be guards along the road, keeping it open and providing protection for settlers nearby.

At nightfall the following day, they reached the confluence of Fortification Creek with the Bear River, called Yampah by the Utes, and camped there. Grass here was dry and heavy. In soft, early dusk sharp challenges from the guards rang out. A sergeant approached Thornburg, close-herding half a dozen Ute braves before him. Thornburg beckoned Elliott.

"What do you make of this?" he asked.

Elliott shrugged and spoke softly, "The tall one is Ute Jack. Big Chief. Behind him is Saarwick an' Unque. Don't know the others. Mebbe they want to pow-wow, mebbe they just want to see how many men you got."

Jack raised his hand, palm forward. Thornburg nodded and extended a handful of cigars. These Jack passed among his braves, and they took time to light up. Now, grinning and blowing clouds of smoke, they peered about with almost child-like curiosity.

Suddenly Jack spoke in his deep, self-possessed voice. "Why white soldiers come?"

Thornburg answered, "Your braves make trouble."

"No trouble. Meeker make trouble. Plow racetrack. Try make Utes work." His voice rose. "Work! Work! Work! Utes no work. Utes hunt, fight." His words were the words of a petulant child, but his demeanor was not. Standing erect in the firelight's glow, he made a compelling and fascinating picture.

Elliott asked dryly, "You been fightin' lately, Jack?" His words drew Jack's angry glance, but no reply. Elliott went on, "What you want here?"

Jack answered now, his voice full of arrogance. "Talk. Utes an' white men brothers. No fight. Talk."

Again Elliott uttered that one, obscene word. He said, "You better hold the bastards, Major. They ain't nothin' but spies."

Thornburg shook his head. "That's against my orders. Washington would say I was provoking trouble."

Captain Nison, behind Elliott, snorted. Thornburg scowled, but said nothing. Elliott asked one last question, "How's things down t' the Agency, Jack? All right?"

It occurred to him that for once Jack did not have a ready answer. The Ute did not meet his eyes as he finally said, "Sure, all right. Plenty all right."

Thornburg spoke to the sergeant. "Give them a box of cigars and get them out of camp."

"All right, you! Git goin'." The sergeant herded them away. Suddenly Elliott knew what they would find at the White River Indian Agency. Burned and gutted buildings, mutilated bodies. Futile rage burned through his body.

Thornburg seemed to sense some of his feelings, for he said softly, "The wagons will catch us tonight, Sam. As soon as they do, we'll go on."

Chapter 12

MEEKER HIMSELF roused the household shortly before four o'clock in the dark, chill morning of September 29th. In Carlie's case, no rousing was necessary. Terror, in the form of nightmares, had stalked her mind all through the long night. Now, it was a relief to get up, to dress, to go about the morning work, and mostly to have the company of other people.

From the window she saw Dave Anderson walk away toward the corral. Still watching, she saw the gray look of panic in Meeker's face as he mounted the porch steps carrying the lantern, an unguarded look, and she felt guilty of eavesdropping. Inside, he was much the same man he had always been, except perhaps that he was more kindly, more gentle, if that were possible.

During and after breakfast, while they lingered over coffee, he indulged in a nostalgic conversation with Mrs. Meeker and Josephine about their past, about their part in the founding of the Greeley Colony, about his life on the *Tribune*.

The sun rose. Nothing happened. Waiting became a torment. Finally Meeker called the entire white population of the Agency together. He spoke slowly. "Perhaps we have been unduly apprehensive. Perhaps they are merely trying to frighten us. In any event, it seems foolish to simply sit and wait. I believe it would do us all good if we could go about our daily work as though nothing had happened, as though nothing were going to happen. I would suggest, however, that you all remain close enough to the house to reach it quickly in case of attack."

His words seemed to take some of the tension from the group. Mrs. Price, rising with obvious eagerness, said in her rich and pleasant voice, "Well! Those are the most sensible

words I've heard today. I've a washing to do." She hustled from the room, her two small children tagging along behind. Price, Joe Hester, and Lon Dorman followed closely, Price murmuring something about a roof to be finished, and smiling with quick pride at his wife's shapely back. Carlie smiled, too, suddenly feeling very drawn to Sophronia Price, who seemed more nearly her own age than anyone else at the Agency, and whose earthy cheerfulness she was growing to admire.

She followed Sophronia out the back door, helped her carry water for the tubs, felt a distinct relief from tension as she immersed her arms in the hot water, scrubbing briskly against the rough washboard.

For a while they worked in silence, a companionable silence, but not for long could either of them keep their doubts and anxieties bottled up. Eventually, it was Carlie who asked, "What's going to happen? The troops can't get here soon enough to do any good."

For an instant Mrs. Price revealed the depths of her own worry, but she quickly covered this with her smile, and her brief words, "Whatever happens, we will find the strength to endure it. Until it does happen, we should not torment ourselves with imaginings. I console myself with one thought, that Indians seldom harm children."

A shudder ran through Carlie. She scrubbed the pair of overalls in her hands with a vigorous concentration, her body turning cold and numb. She was startled when Mrs. Price shook her arm. "You'll wear them out," Sophronia told her gently. "You mustn't let yourself think so much."

Carlie smiled apologetically. "I'm so afraid of the Indians," she said. "It's almost an obsession with me." She thought of the cruel games Otis used to play, getting an Indian to jump at her as she stepped out of the door, then roaring with laughter at her fright.

This is where they were when the first shots sounded. Sophronia's tiny girl was sleeping inside the house; Carlie and Sophronia were hanging out clothes. The boy, Johnnie, played in the dust beside the clothesbasket. Price was atop the new storehouse roof, spreading dirt, while two others stood in the wagon below, tossing it up to him. Inside the

house, Josephine and Mrs. Meeker were washing dishes. Meeker was composing a letter to the Indian Bureau.

Both Carlie and Sophronia froze as the first chatter of rifle fire rolled across the valley, coming from the direction of the new storehouse. Sophronia's glance went in the direction of the new storehouse which was not visible from where she stood because of a long shed that stood between.

Her face twisting, Sophronia snatched up the little boy and ran. Nearer to the house, with her view unobstructed, she paused and stared at the empty storehouse roof, turning toward it, sheer agony constricting her face. She thrust Johnnie at Carlie, crying, "Ed! That's Ed there on the ground!"

Lon Dorman and Joe Hester were running toward them. Sophronia cried, "They're leaving him! They're leaving Ed!" Lon fell at that moment, stumbling and clawing, twitched several times and then lay still. Without pausing, Joe Hester continued and reached the porch unhurt, disappearing from Carlie's view.

She refused the proffer of the child, but she could not utter the words that hung on her lips, "They left Ed because he's dead." Instead she caught at Sophronia, dragging her toward the back door. "You can't go out there! They'll kill you!"

Pulling at the crazed Sophronia, Carlie reached the door, yanked it open, pushing her inside. The boy was crying loudly, his terror inspired by that of his mother. Sophronia put the boy on the floor. Her face had a strange, set, empty sort of look. "I'm going back. Ed's out there! They've hurt Ed and he needs me!" She broke away from Carlie, her strength amazing. She would have gotten out the door but for Meeker's timely arrival.

Catching her by the arms, he told her sternly, "Your children need you! You can help no one out there!" Mrs. Price seemed to quiet under his compelling stare, but her face had turned deathly pale and her eyes were dull and stricken. Again snatching up the boy, she ran for her bedroom, with Carlie following close behind. The tiny girl had wakened, and began to cry when she saw her mother.

Joe Hester, a pale, scholarly looking fellow, rushed in behind Carlie. He saw Sophronia and stopped. Answering the

question in her eyes, he said, as though he could not believe his own words, "He's dead. Ed's dead. One minute he was up on the roof, the next—" He spied Price's rifle on the bed, snatched it up and ran to the window.

The Utes were circling the house, carrying lighted torches, yelling fiendishly and setting fire to anything that would burn. Joe Hester knocked out the window with the barrel of his rifle, raised it and fired.

Even while she feared it would bring retaliation, Carlie tingled with obscure pride, knowing that this was the first, and would probably be the last shot fired in their defense. She saw one of the Utes fall, red staining his naked chest, and thought she recognized the man as one who had accompanied Colorow and Johnson up on the pass.

Mrs. Meeker and Josephine crowded into Mrs. Price's bedroom, which faced the porch. Meeker, with an odd sort of defiance for the danger, walked out onto the porch as though he would scold a crowd of noisy, recalcitrant children. Rushing to the broken window, Mrs. Meeker called, "Nathan! Come back in here! They'll—"

He shook his head at her. A roar went up from the Utes. Charging toward him, they suddenly stopped as though abashed. Meeker's voice was stern, addressing Douglass who stood nearest, "Why have you done this thing? Have I not been honest and fair with you? Why have you murdered these innocent people? If you must kill someone, kill me, for if there is any blame, it is mine."

Douglass' face was like that of a sullen, whipped boy. He said huskily, "You promise me wagon. Red wagon. You plow up racetrack. Utes no like you. You bad."

For a moment Meeker seemed nonplused by this childish answer. It was a moment when he should have been talking. A low growl began in the rear of the group of Indians. Mrs. Meeker screamed, "Nathan!"

Deliberately, as though sighting a target, Douglass raised his rifle. Meeker caught the bullet in his chest and it slammed him back against the door. As though at a signal, all the Utes fired. Their bullets ripped into the door, the wall, into the porch floor, into the inert body of Meeker.

With a fiendish whoop, the Utes were upon him, seizing

his heels and dragging him down the steps. His head bumped sickeningly on every step. His body left a little trail in the dust before the porch. Then he was gone and the Utes with him.

Mrs. Meeker fainted. Carlie helped Sophronia and Josephine carry her to the bed. Josephine stroked her mother's forehead with a nerveless, shaking hand.

Joe Hester's voice raised to a near-shriek, "I'm not going to stay here and be butchered! I'm getting out of here! Do any of you want to come?"

Carlie shook her head at him dully. "It's no use running. There are too many of them. They'll catch you."

"Anything's better than sitting here waiting, like pigs for the butcher!" His eyes wild, he lurched out, down the porch steps, carrying Price's rifle. Northward he ran, into the tall brush.

Sophronia sat on the floor with her children, murmuring, "Ed, Ed," over and over, while the children cried unheeded. Carlie ran and bolted the bedroom door, returning then to watch fearfully from the window. She saw the Indians beating through the brush after Joe Hester, saw him break cover and start up the hillside. Half a dozen shots barked and he seemed to stumble. But he went on, crawling on hands and knees until the Utes caught up and finished him with their clubbing rifle butts. He, too, like Meeker, they seized by his heels and dragged back toward the house.

Shuddering uncontrollably, Carlie turned from the window. Now a crash in the rear of the house told her they had broken down the door. She could hear them moving through the house, looting, destroying, could hear their guttural speech, their childish howls of pleasure when they would find something they liked. Arms laden with spoils, they began to file out of the front door. Sophronia roused sufficiently to say bitterly, "They're busy for now. But before long they'll remember us."

Still they all waited until finally Mrs. Meeker stirred on the bed and sat up, pain of knowledge growing in her dazed eyes. Carlie raised the broken window, saying, "If we could make it to the milkhouse." She added, "It's of stone and won't

burn." She had heard the ominous crackling of flames in the stripped and gutted house.

Now, something drew the Utes from the house, from the porch, toward the rear where Carlie and Mrs. Price had been working a few moments before. Carlie cried, "Let's run for it! Something's drawn them to the back of the house!" It seemed natural for her to be the one who urged these women, whose minds were dulled by the suddenness of their bereavement, into action. Stumbling like sleepwalkers, they filed from the house, ran the short distance to the milkhouse. Carlie's flesh chilled with horror at the scream, torn from the lips of someone behind the house. Counting off the men present at the Agency, she murmured, "Mr. McCune. They've found him."

Carefully avoiding mention of the scream, which they all had heard, they barred the door, shutting themselves into dim twilight, for the milkhouse had but one tiny window which was glazed with accumulated dirt. In Carlie, as in all of them, was the certainty that this was but a short respite, that eventually the Utes would find them. The air became increasingly bad. Over everything lingered the smell of sour milk.

Toward late afternoon, the Indians tried to force the door and repeated heavy blows rained upon it as though from a log or battering ram. But it was exceedingly stout and withstood their assault. The soft, incoherent prayers of the women were the only sounds after that for nearly half an hour. Then Carlie heard the crackling of flames as a fire was kindled outside against the door.

"Fifteen minutes," murmured Sophronia, her voice filled with rising hysteria.

Carlie wondered why no one had mentioned or thought of self-destruction. Considering this, she felt humbled by what she knew to be the reasons this means of escape had been overlooked both by the Meeker women and Sophronia Price. To the Meekers, deeply religious, suicide was a violation of one of God's commandments. To more earthy Sophronia, there were her children, not to be deprived of a mother's care no matter what that mother was made to suffer. Carlie shuddered, and remembered Sophronia's words earlier in the day, "Whatever happens, we will find the strength to endure it."

Heat increased inside the milkhouse until they were choking and gasping for breath. The children had long since sobbed themselves to sleep, but now awoke to cry anew. Suddenly there was light, reddish light, that of flame. There was smoke, billowing into the room. The door had burned through.

The women crouched in the far corner of the milkhouse. The door yielded with a shower of red-hot sparks and embers, and the Utes burst through the opening, laughing fiercely and triumphantly. One by one the women were seized and dragged into the blessedly cool, fresh air.

Carlie did not resist, though her flesh crawled at the Indians' touch, and when they saw she did not, they took their hands from her. She heard the name, "Colorow," often as the Utes would look at her, and gathered with a shudder that she was Colorow's special prize. She had a respite, at least, until the fat chief arrived.

Douglass dragged Mrs. Meeker away, and another took Josephine, who carried Mrs. Price's Johnnie in her arms. Sophronia's captor was a stunted and skinny Ute.

Around them was complete and utter desolation. The house and other buildings were a heap of smoking rubble. Farm implements and wagons had been battered and wrecked. The corn had been trampled deliberately into the ground by the hoofs of the Utes' galloping horses.

For nearly an hour, Carlie was kept standing amid the smoking rubble of what had once been the White River Indian Agency. Finally, an Indian brought a horse and indicated that she was to mount.

This she did, and her guard nudged the horse into a procession of mounted Indians which splashed across the river, heading upward toward the wilderness that lay between White and Grand Rivers.

She did not see either the Meekers or Mrs. Price again until the party camped at moonrise. She heard Josephine's soft call then, "Mrs. Otis!" and went in the direction of the sound, slipping to the ground beside the tall girl. Clasping hands in the darkness, they watched the striding figure of Chief Douglass, twenty-five feet away, as he tried with clumsy and some-

times ridiculous phrases to justify the bloody work which had been done this day.

"He's talking to mother," whispered Josephine, and Carlie could see the exhausted, hunched figure of Mrs. Meeker on the ground.

Douglass ranted, "You know why Utes kill Meeker, other men? Thornburg say he going to take Ute Chiefs to Fort Steele an' put in calaboose. Thornburg have picture, show Meeker, you, others—show bullet holes marked on bodies. Thornburg tell Utes this what Meeker send to Washington. Meeker tell Washington this what happen to family if soldiers no come."

His voice rose in anger. "Why you not say something? Why you just sit—an' look?" Douglass swore at her and stalked off.

The night air was cold, but it was not the night that sent those clammy chills along the length of Carlie's body. She was thinking of Colorow, somewhere out there in the darkness. He might be riding into camp now. He might not come for a week. But when he did, would she find the strength to endure? Would Reed be too late?

She thought, "A knife. I'll find a knife somehow. I'll hide it in my dress. Colorow will never touch me because I'll kill him if he does." She began to shiver, and to plan feverishly. After a while she rose and slipped away from Josephine into the darkness.

Carlie, in her bed of foul-smelling blankets, caressed the sharp edge of the knife with her finger. It had been easy, ridiculously so. A sleeping brave, a gentle tug at the knife.

Despairing, thinking of Reed as of someone already dead, Carlie finally succumbed to exhaustion and to the drug of continued and sustained terror. She slept.

Chapter 13

FOR MORE THAN thirty-six helpless, hopeless hours, Quentin Reed lay atop the shale rim, shooting with deadly accuracy at every Ute who was careless or foolish enough to show himself. The first night, half a dozen had scaled the bluff in darkness, hoping to take him by surprise, but Reed, as sensitive to sound as an animal, met them with swinging rifle butt. In a savage battle that lasted only thirty seconds, he took a knife slash in his thigh and killed four of the Utes. When morning came, he rolled their bodies from the bluff and watched them tumble grotesquely to the bottom of the loose, steep slope, limp as rag dolls.

Grimly, he realized that the Utes had changed their tactics. Now they would wait until he weakened from thirst and hunger and lack of sleep. When that happened, they would take him without further loss to themselves.

So why did he wait? He could not even explain this to himself. He was aware that anything was better than slow weakening by starvation. Still, his odd reluctance to force the issue persisted.

Drowsing, he was snapped into instant wakefulness by the utterly improbable sound of a distant bugle. For several moments he lay completely still, his mind straining to rationalize the sound. Then he leaped to his feet, fully awake, knowing with deep and pleasant relief that the troops had arrived.

With no further waste of time, he took up his rifle and felt his way to the rim, easing himself over and down its face. The sound of that bugle was certain to be disconcerting to the besieging Utes, and for these first few moments they would be off guard. With long, rapid strides, with no attempt to cover the sound of his descent, Reed came down the slope on the opposite side from which the bugle had sounded.

No man could sneak down this loose, shaly slope without making enough noise to rouse the camped Indians. A little more noise would rouse them no quicker and speed was essential.

Reaching the bottom, Reed took a precious moment to drop flat at the stream and gulp a few mouthfuls of water. Then he was off, circling the direct route between bluff and bugle, his caution returning. He moved slowly and soundlessly, and felt the dizziness from lack of food and water and sleep. Mildly surprised that there were no sounds of pursuit, he quickly deduced that the Utes had withdrawn, forgetting him in their surprise and pre-occupation over the night-marching troops.

An hour brought him to the camp where fires winked openly in the night, where bone-weary troopers fried their bacon and sank in complete exhaustion upon the ground. He reached the limits of the camp, heard the surprised challenge of a sentry, then a small man in stinking buckskins bounded up to him, slapping him mightily on the back.

"Reed! My God, where you been, man? How's things at the Agency, an' what you doin' 'way up here?"

Reed laughed with pleased and genuine amusement, gripping Elliott's calloused hand. He said, "The smell of bacon and coffee's got my mouth watering so I can hardly talk. Lordy, I haven't eaten in two days."

Elliott dragged him toward the light wagon that was the officers' mess wagon, got a plate from the cook and heaped it high with beans and roast venison. Trying not to wolf it, Reed spoke in jerky sentences, his mouth full, his stomach griping as the food slid into it.

"Never got to the Agency, Sam. I would have, except that I ran into a messenger Meeker had sent out. He was about to get himself killed by the Indians. Like a damn fool, I stepped in. I didn't help much, as it turned out, but I sure brought the Utes down on me. I've been pinned on a peak for the last two nights."

Elliott, sober and grim of mouth, told him, "We found what was left of your outfit at Otis' place."

Reed stopped chewing, his eyes growing hard in the flickering light from the fire. "All dead?"

"Every damn one of 'em."

Reed said slowly, "Sam, Otis is behind all this. He's stirred up this hornets' nest just so he can grab that herd of cattle down at the Agency." He stared into the fire for several moments. "I'll find him. He can't go far enough to get away from me. And if anything has happened to Carlie—" His face twisted. He repeated softly, "I'll find him, Sam."

Elliott's eyes glittered. "I think you will at that."

Thornburg's tall shape loomed beside him as he spoke, Nison stepping in close behind, the thin curl of contempt as always on his lips. Sam Elliott said, "This is Quentin Reed, Major. I told you about him. He owns the freight line, what's left of it. Injuns had him pinned on a bluff fer two days."

Nison spoke in his clipped, unpleasant way, "Major, if these damned traders and renegades would stay out of the Reservation, we wouldn't have so much trouble."

Elliott whitened and his fists clenched. Reed stared with amazement at the tall captain, slow to comprehend this abrupt and unmerited unpleasantness. Then his eyes turned quickly wild and he stepped close to the captain, gathering his tunic front in a hard fist, tensing to smash the other into the man's smoothly handsome face. Thornburg barked, "Mr. Reed!"

Reed swung angrily around, amazement at the unexpected insult still plain in his face. Thornburg himself appeared to be deeply angered. Reed said, "Major, if the son-of-a-bitch ties into me again, you won't stop me." He released the captain who stood stiff and still. Slowly the flaring light died in Reed's eyes and he asked, "How soon you pushing on?"

"Dawn. You had all better turn in because we won't camp again until we reach the Agency."

Reed nodded, his chill glance resting on Nison deliberately, baiting the man. Thornburg turned away, saying curtly, "Captain."

Reed growled, "Damned renegade, am I? What's eating that bastard, Sam?"

Sam Elliott shook his head, slouching away from the fire. "Jist meanness, I reckon. I'll git you some blankets."

At dawn the command filed noisily onward, climbing now toward the summit of Yellow Jacket Pass, and the Reserva-

tion boundary. Elliott rode with Reed to Thornburg's side. He said, "Major, I ain't one to tell a man his business, but hadn't you ought to put out some scouts an' flankers?"

"Too risky. I can't afford to have any trouble. Indians will jump a flanker quicker than they will a column." He smiled and there was chagrin and apology in his smile. He glanced at Reed. "According to the Indian Bureau, the Indian wars are a thing of the past. That is, unless some impetuous army officer kicks up a fuss. They were very careful to warn me that in case of trouble I would be guilty until proved innocent. Nowadays, Mr. Reed, an Indian is a misunderstood and badly used ward of the government, no matter what the actual situation. The pendulum of public opinion has swung from the extreme of several years ago to the other extreme. There doesn't seem to be any middle ground."

Slowed by the toiling, grinding wagons, it was ten o'clock before they reached the top of the grade. Here the road wound around a small point of land, beginning its descent on the far side. Reed could feel the extreme tension in Sam Elliott and asked, "What's eating you, Sam?"

"I got a hunch. Mebbe I smell 'em." Abruptly he rammed the spurs into his horse's ribs, at a dead run before he had gone ten yards. He pounded to the head of the column as they were taking the right turn in the road that would lead them around the point. He said, "Major, this is the boundary, the top of Yellow Jacket Pass." He saw Captain Nison approaching and his words tumbled jerkily out. "If you have any trouble it'll likely be here. Turn off the road an' head up across that point. If I'm wrong there'll be no harm done."

Reed edged his horse deliberately into the path of Nison, feeling an odd belligerence, the full desire to make himself unpleasant. He had seen the way Elliott shrank from Nison's sour sarcasms, now had the unconscious wish to spare Sam any more of it. Nison was not to be denied his few words, however, and he circled Reed's horse, coming up on the other side. He asked, "Trouble, Major?"

"Mr. Elliott wants us to cross that point."

Nison grinned at Elliott. "You sense Indians around us, is that it? You smell them, don't you? An old wound in your leg is itching or something like that?" He snorted contemptuously.

"Every damn one of 'em."

Reed said slowly, "Sam, Otis is behind all this. He's stirred up this hornets' nest just so he can grab that herd of cattle down at the Agency." He stared into the fire for several moments. "I'll find him. He can't go far enough to get away from me. And if anything has happened to Carlie—" His face twisted. He repeated softly, "I'll find him, Sam."

Elliott's eyes glittered. "I think you will at that."

Thornburg's tall shape loomed beside him as he spoke, Nison stepping in close behind, the thin curl of contempt as always on his lips. Sam Elliott said, "This is Quentin Reed, Major. I told you about him. He owns the freight line, what's left of it. Injuns had him pinned on a bluff fer two days."

Nison spoke in his clipped, unpleasant way, "Major, if these damned traders and renegades would stay out of the Reservation, we wouldn't have so much trouble."

Elliott whitened and his fists clenched. Reed stared with amazement at the tall captain, slow to comprehend this abrupt and unmerited unpleasantness. Then his eyes turned quickly wild and he stepped close to the captain, gathering his tunic front in a hard fist, tensing to smash the other into the man's smoothly handsome face. Thornburg barked, "Mr. Reed!"

Reed swung angrily around, amazement at the unexpected insult still plain in his face. Thornburg himself appeared to be deeply angered. Reed said, "Major, if the son-of-a-bitch ties into me again, you won't stop me." He released the captain who stood stiff and still. Slowly the flaring light died in Reed's eyes and he asked, "How soon you pushing on?"

"Dawn. You had all better turn in because we won't camp again until we reach the Agency."

Reed nodded, his chill glance resting on Nison deliberately, baiting the man. Thornburg turned away, saying curtly, "Captain."

Reed growled, "Damned renegade, am I? What's eating that bastard, Sam?"

Sam Elliott shook his head, slouching away from the fire. "Jist meanness, I reckon. I'll git you some blankets."

At dawn the command filed noisily onward, climbing now toward the summit of Yellow Jacket Pass, and the Reserva-

tion boundary. Elliott rode with Reed to Thornburg's side. He said, "Major, I ain't one to tell a man his business, but hadn't you ought to put out some scouts an' flankers?"

"Too risky. I can't afford to have any trouble. Indians will jump a flanker quicker than they will a column." He smiled and there was chagrin and apology in his smile. He glanced at Reed. "According to the Indian Bureau, the Indian wars are a thing of the past. That is, unless some impetuous army officer kicks up a fuss. They were very careful to warn me that in case of trouble I would be guilty until proved innocent. Nowadays, Mr. Reed, an Indian is a misunderstood and badly used ward of the government, no matter what the actual situation. The pendulum of public opinion has swung from the extreme of several years ago to the other extreme. There doesn't seem to be any middle ground."

Slowed by the toiling, grinding wagons, it was ten o'clock before they reached the top of the grade. Here the road wound around a small point of land, beginning its descent on the far side. Reed could feel the extreme tension in Sam Elliott and asked, "What's eating you, Sam?"

"I got a hunch. Mebbe I smell 'em." Abruptly he rammed the spurs into his horse's ribs, at a dead run before he had gone ten yards. He pounded to the head of the column as they were taking the right turn in the road that would lead them around the point. He said, "Major, this is the boundary, the top of Yellow Jacket Pass." He saw Captain Nison approaching and his words tumbled jerkily out. "If you have any trouble it'll likely be here. Turn off the road an' head up across that point. If I'm wrong there'll be no harm done."

Reed edged his horse deliberately into the path of Nison, feeling an odd belligerence, the full desire to make himself unpleasant. He had seen the way Elliott shrank from Nison's sour sarcasms, now had the unconscious wish to spare Sam any more of it. Nison was not to be denied his few words, however, and he circled Reed's horse, coming up on the other side. He asked, "Trouble, Major?"

"Mr. Elliott wants us to cross that point."

Nison grinned at Elliott. "You sense Indians around us, is that it? You smell them, don't you? An old wound in your leg is itching or something like that?" He snorted contemptuously.

Sam Elliott reddened. Reed felt his own anger rising, anger that would soon leap out of bounds. A man's hunches shame him in the face of cold logic. All the same, a scout's hunches are the things that keep him alive.

He said harshly, "Major, Sam Elliott's lived through two or three Indian wars. If he had a hunch I'd ought to stand on my head, I'd get down and do it."

Abruptly Thornburg waved the column left, leaving the road, climbing the gentle slope that led across the point. Reed glanced back, saw the first of the wagons nearly half a mile behind. Then they topped the rise.

Thornburg reined in so sharply his horse reared. Nison yanked his pistol from its holster and snapped it up to eye-level. Reed crowded his mount against Nison's and with one outflung arm knocked the pistol down. His other hand gripped the captain's wrist. Thornburg took cognizance of this with a curt, "Damn it, Nison, who's in command here?"

Reed had no eyes for the look of hate Nison flashed at him. He was staring at the massed Utes before him, many of them with their backs turned as they watched the road below, the road along which the cavalry would now be riding but for Sam Elliott's hunch. A Ute yelled, and the Indians wheeled their horses in consternation. Reed grinned. "The ambushers ambushed," he muttered.

A long minute elapsed while Thornburg sat, unmoving, staring, with the stamp of indecision in his face. Elliott spoke with patient urgency, "There's over three hundred of them there, Major. For Christ's sake, get your men into some kind of order and tell them to fire!"

Still Thornburg stared. The troops kept coming up behind, bunching and spreading out, muttering uneasily to themselves.

The major's voice was lifeless as he finally spoke. "Sam, I don't dare start it. My orders are specific. A violation of them would mean court martial and dismissal from the service. But I feel as though we are all about to be murdered."

The Utes were moving, quietly trotting, spreading out still further as they flanked the outnumbered troops. Reed said angrily, "Major, don't you see what they're doing?" He could see the imposing figure of Ute Jack, greased and painted,

and behind him, fat and glowering Colorow. That same moment Colorow spied him and with incredible speed snapped his rifle up. Reed dived from the saddle, hearing the crack of the Ute's rifle in mid-air. Then he was on the ground, rolling, clawing at his Colt.

He heard Thornburg's firm, loud yell, "Dismount! Troop E to the right, F to the left. As skirmishers!"

A withering fire poured into the massed troops, but now, Thornburg was released of his impotence. Reed scrambled to his feet, caught his horse. Colorow was nowhere to be seen, but everywhere the yelling savages wheeled and circled. Fifty of them had galloped over the rise to the rear of the column, completely surrounding the troops and cutting them off from their supply wagons.

Seeing a debacle in the making, Thornburg remounted and, waving his pistol, yelled, "Twenty men! I want twenty men to get to the wagons! Captain Nison, retreat to the wagons!"

Reed swung up and rode with Thornburg. Strangely, Sam Elliott chose to remain with Nison.

With twenty men at their backs, Reed and the major galloped over the rise directly into the horde of screaming, painted and sweating savages.

The Utes, seeing this charge and knowing immediately the purpose of it, massed solidly directly in their path. The troopers spread out in a line behind, laying before them a swath of lead that melted the ranks of the Utes. Then they were among the Indians, Reed's gun was empty, and he was clubbing it by the muzzle.

He sensed Thornburg's absence, checked his horse and glanced back. The major lay in a heap on the ground, his horse dead across his hips. Coughing blood, Thornburg shouted, "Don't stop! Go on!"

Reed rallied the hesitating troopers with a yell that was primitive and savage. He saw the small advantage they had slipping away as time slipped away. Then they were through the Utes, no more than half a dozen of them out of the original twenty.

The wagon teams had stopped. Drivers lay behind the seats,

rifles leveled, waiting. Reed shouted, "Get out of there! Drive, Goddammit! Drive!"

This was what the teamsters wanted; someone to tell them what to do. They scrambled out on the seats, leaving their rifles behind, taking up the reins. Whips snaked out, mercilessly flicking here and there, and the horses, army horses with blood and powdersmoke in their flaring nostrils, literally sprang into a dead run.

Not far from the spring that is the head of Yellow Jacket Creek, the lumbering, swaying supply wagons met with the retreating troops, circled and stopped. Horses, shot, fell in their traces, and their unhurt mates kicked and fought and screamed until they were killed or cut loose.

Where Reed stood, legs apart, firing his hastily reloaded rifle, Sam Elliott found him, and yanked him down behind a wagon wheel. "You damn fool! Colorow's offered twenty ponies to the brave that gits you!"

Reed grunted, "You made it. Nison get back, too?"

Elliott nodded. "I had t' stick my gun in his guts. He wanted to attack." The scout snorted. "Attack! It'da been a slaughter!"

Into the hastily constructed stockade now galloped a trooper. "The major's dead, sir. I tried to bring his body back, but I couldn't roll his horse off him."

Elliott grunted, "Holy Christ! Look what we got fer a commander now," all this while coolly sighting and firing his old Henry rifle. In the face of the deadly fire from behind the bulwarks of the wagons and dead horses, the Utes retreated to higher ground from which they could snipe at the camp from cover.

In this temporary lull, Reed glanced hastily about, taking stock of their losses. Seventy-five percent of the horses lay either here, where their presence was deadly, or back along the route of the retreat. Of the hundred and sixty men, twenty were dead, another thirty or forty wounded. The surgeon had emptied a wagon, and here he probed and cauterized, sewed and bandaged.

Reed decided the greatest danger lay in the horses, the dead ones. By tomorrow night the stench of them would be a sickish sweet pall over the barricade. Millions of flies would

swarm to the carcasses. Beside him a trooper grunted sharply and folded forward. Reed turned him over, looked at his glazed eyes. He shrugged. Perhaps he needn't worry about the horses. Perhaps the stench of decaying flesh would bother no one, except the buzzards already gathering in the hot, brassy sky.

Chapter 14

ANYTHING is a lull after the full fury of battle. During the afternoon the command lay in the drowsy-warm heat of October's sun, some sleeping, some praying soundlessly, some talking.

Sam Elliott snored faintly beside Reed, his mouth slack, his face glistening with a light film of sweat. Captain Nison, back propped against a wagon wheel in one of the few spots of shade, stared unseeing off beyond the compound, his mouth hard, his eyes bitter.

Sporadically, rifles cracked in the timber to the east, from atop the shaly cliff to the west. Reed wondered when Nison would get a grip on himself, when he would stop dreaming of promotion and glory and get down to the tough, realistic business of salvaging what men were left.

There seemed little hope that the Utes had not molested the Agency. With his thoughts turning this way, with the cold fear, fear for Carlie crawling in his own entrails, Reed impatiently shook Sam Elliott. "Damn it, Sam, I want to talk to you."

Sam sat up, eyes clear, his brain in no way dulled or blurred by sleep. "Still quiet, huh? Nison said anything yet?"

"Not yet." Reed hesitated, blurting then, "Sam, are the Utes like the Apaches or like the Plains Indians?"

"You mean what do they do with white women?"

Reed nodded, his sick eyes on the ground. He would hate the one answer. He thought the other would drive him mad. Elliott said, "Figure she's dead, son. She's a pretty woman."

Reed's eyes turned black and wild, his hands strained against the earth. Between tight lips he whispered, "Will she die, Sam?"

"Depends on her, I reckon. Depends on her. Knew a

woman once who was captured by Cheyennes which is worse by a heap than Utes. She lived. She was a mighty fine woman."

Reed's expression was bleak. Sam Elliott, watching him, grew uncomfortable and crawled away toward the mess wagon, but Reed did not even see him go. His face was granite, his eyes those of a mortally wounded animal. Pain twisted his mouth.

He fought himself until his body was bathed in sweat. Carlie, whose hair was the gold of tall, sun-cured grass, handled and mauled and bruised by a horde of savages.

When Elliott came back to him at sundown, Reed lay in much the same position, but the grimness had left him entirely. He got up, stretching, careless or thoughtless of the snipers in the higher ground.

Sam said, "Nison sent a trooper fer Dodge an' his cavalry. The goddam fool! Forty more men to feed to the slaughter."

"Why a trooper? Why not you?"

A slow, deep flush of anger stained Elliott's leathery face. "Said he couldn't trust me. Said I'd likely skip to save my own skin."

"He'll come crawling before we're through here, Sam. He's still hoping he can snatch a victory somehow out of this. When he finds he can't, when a message to Rawlins means living or dying to him, he'll come to you then."

No fires winked in the camp tonight. Sentries were posted outside the ring of bloated horses. Inside the compound, sweating men dug trenches in a futile and pathetic attempt to bury the carcasses. But before ten o'clock, the project was abandoned as impractical. Over a hundred horses lay in the immediate vicinity of the camp. It became obvious even to the captain that the hundred unwounded men he had could scarcely accomplish the task, and eat, and sleep, and fight all at the same time. At the suggestion of one of his lieutenants, Nison sent a detail to the spring. All through the night they patiently dipped water in buckets and carried it back to the camp.

Dozing fitfully at intervals, Reed and Elliott spent the night beneath one of the supply wagons, rifles close under their

hands. Once Reed asked, "What's between you and Nison, Sam?"

"Why, I reckon he blames me fer the answers I gave to a board of inquiry eight or ten years ago. I reckon he figures it's kept him from bein' promoted as much as he should." Sam's voice was a soft murmur in the quiet camp. "He jumped a party of Sioux onct when I was with him. Turned out like I said it would, a trap. He lost a dozen men, an' would have lost a heap more exceptin' fer luck. I jist told the truth. I reckoned mebbe he'd learnt his lesson without no help from me. Don't guess he did, though. His men, nor the Army, nor nothin' else means anythin' to him. Only himself, the promotions he gits. He's layin' over there now tryin' t' figger out a way t' fish a victory outen this so's he'll git his name in the newspapers, an' mebbe a citation."

Abruptly Reed changed the subject. "I'm not going to stay here, Sam. I came into camp because I figured it was the quickest way to get down to the Agency. But this bunch of soldiers isn't going to the Agency."

"No."

"I'm going to pull out of camp and head on down there by myself."

Elliott gestured toward the east, toward the deep gray line that marked the horizon's dim silhouette. "Not tonight, you ain't. In half an hour there'll be three hundred yellin' Injuns makin' a try fer your scalp. They're all ready, jist waitin' fer light enough to shoot by. You'd never git through 'em."

A stir came from the camp as sergeants and corporals moved among the men, shaking them awake. The smell of coffee was faint and pleasant on the frosty air. The steady, murmured cursing of newly awakened troopers became a low drone. The few remaining horses on the picket line stirred nervously, and one whinnied.

Reed rose and made his groping way toward the muffled banging of tin cups and came to the mess wagon. Tense expectancy hung over the troopers.

Sipping the scalding black coffee, Reed felt the slow rise of the old wildness, the lust for battle. It showed itself in his narrowed eyes, in the faint tremor in his hands.

Quietly the troops assumed their positions, behind wagons,

behind the carcasses of dead horses. Reed laid his saddlebags on the ground before him, filling one pocket with cartridges for the Colt, the other with rifle cartridges.

Now the gray line in the east had spread to the entire sky. Objects across the narrow width of the camp were dimly visible. Elliott slid down beside Reed, saying, "Ten minutes. Looks like a man'd git used to 'em after a while."

Reed said, "First one for me. How do they come, Sam? In waves, or all at once?"

"They'll likely come in two waves, figgerin' the fust one'll overrun us an' while we're busy with them, the second can come in without too much loss."

Reed focused his eyes on the timber at the edge of the clearing. He saw movement then behind the screen of golden brush and evergreen, reached over to touch Elliott's arm. A trooper ten feet away yelled in a voice that broke on a high note, "Here they come! Here the bastards come!"

With shocking abruptness the quiet air was shattered by high whooping yells, by the thunder of galloping horses. Nison screamed, "Hold your fire! Hold your fire!"

But in spite of this order, sporadic firing broke out among the troopers. The line of Utes, crouching low on the necks of their ponies, rolled across the clearing. When the range had dropped to a hundred yards, Nison yelled, "Pick your man!" A moment later, "Fire! Goddammit, fire!"

Reed lined his sights on a naked, grimacing brave and squeezed the trigger. Comforting was the solid recoil of the Winchester, more comforting the solid satisfaction of seeing his target tumble from his horse into the knee-deep grass. Grinning, he snapped his sights to another, firing again, but missing this time as the Ute swerved and fired under the neck of his speeding pony.

Reed saw the unmistakable bulk of Colorow passing near the end of the camp. Rolling swiftly, he came under the wagon, rose to his knees on the other side, fired at the instant Colorow galloped from his sight. He could hear Elliott's frantic, "Reed! Dammit man, you could git killed doin' that! Your scalp's worth twenty ponies!"

The rifle was empty, and Reed was fifteen feet from his cartridge cache, so he flung the rifle under the wagon and

dragged out the Colt. Now, backing like a badger into a burrow, he kept the pistol bucking against his palm until the hammer clicked on an empty chamber.

The wave of Indians had split. Whirling their horses on the other, largely unprotected side, they streamed through the breaches between the wagons and into the tiny stockade, using rifles as clubs, some swinging deadly war hatchets.

Elliott had not changed his position, except to roll over on his back and sit up. Coolly now, he pumped round after round from the old Henry, reloading calmly when the gun had emptied.

There was not the patience in Reed for reloading, nor the thought, nor the will. A red haze drifted across his vision. Yanking a musket from the inert hands of a dead trooper, he moved into the center of the compound, half crouching, the gun held by its heated muzzle. Seeing a riderless Indian pony, not liking this hand-to-hand encounter between himself on foot and the men on horseback, he snatched at the animal's trailing reins and swung himself up.

Except for his clothing, he might have been one of the screaming savages, so well did he maneuver the horse with his knees. He tumbled one Ute from his horse with a vicious poke of the rifle butt that smashed mouth and jaws. He broke the arm of another as the Indian raised his rifle to fire at something on the ground.

He lost himself in the fight, did not notice that the Utes were withdrawing, and was enormously surprised to find himself astride the Ute pony in the middle of the compound with no one to fight. Blood was streaming from a gash in his forehead, and impatiently he brushed it from his eyes. The troopers' losses were surprisingly light. Two men killed, three wounded seriously. Eight Indians lay dead within the compound, perhaps a dozen more outside.

Reed tied the horse to a wagon and walked to where Elliott sat rolling a cigarette. He was panting hoarsely, his eyes fierce, slow to turn normal "Got me a horse," he said.

"You damn near got yourself killed, too. I sat here an' knocked two off their hosses that was fixin' to do you in. You don't act like you got good sense."

Reed shrugged, a grin spreading over his dirty face. He

said, "If I was an Indian, I'd bring in the attack an hour before dawn when nobody was expecting it. What happened to the second wave?"

Elliott grunted, "They came an' went. It's a good thing you ain't a Injun. If they ever done that they'd set civilization back a hundred years."

Reed sank to the ground. Excitement was ebbing fast and weariness crept over him. Already men were at work digging graves for the two dead troopers, and the wounded were lined up at the surgeon's improvised hospital. A bugler walked to the center of the compaund and sounded mess call.

A sniper's bullet smashed his arm when he was halfway through it, but he caught up the bugle in his left hand, finished the call weakly as blood dripped to the ground from his dangling fingers.

Reed felt a tingling surge of admiration. He breathed, "Guts! By God, that took guts!"

Elliott snorted disgustedly, "Mebbeso. But what damned good did it do?"

Nison bellowed, "When you come for your chow, crawl, by God, or I'll beat you to your knees myself!"

Elliott whistled unbelievably. "Nol That ain't Nison. That sounded like a man with some sense!"

Reed grinned. "Maybe he's getting some sense," he murmured, "but maybe he's getting it too late."

Chapter 15

THE SUN turned this high country to gleaming gold, lingering on the yellow, dew-drenched leaves of the sarvus, on the deeper ochre of the oak brush. In the ripe grass, diamonds of moisture caught the brilliant rays and reflected them. The sun was warmth, and assurance for men to whom dark and gray-dawn meant fear and insecurity.

This was a day, thought Reed, that should be shining on toiling wagons, bringing progress, on riders following their small bunches of white-faced cattle, on women hanging clothes in the sunshine and smiling at children playing obscure games in the dust. This country could raise grain in millions of bushels, hay in thousands of tons, beef in millions of pounds.

Ruefully he told himself, "This is white man's reasoning. It is the thing the Utes are fighting. Whatever the excuse, this is what they are fighting. But the fight will only hasten their move westward into the desert."

He followed Elliott in the chow line, ate his beans and drank his coffee gratefully, surprised to find himself so ravenous. Always now, the sense of time running away from him persisted, and he said to Sam Elliott, "Tonight? Will he send you tonight?"

"He'll have to. Dodge will get here today, but it will do no good. Forty men can't fight three hundred savages, especially when they're scattered over a square mile of timber and brush."

"He won't want to let me go out alone. But when you leave, I'm leaving, too."

Elliott nodded reluctantly. "You'll have less chance of stayin' alive thataway, but I know better than t' argue with you."

A light breeze had come up with the sunrise, and now it

stiffened with rough gustiness. Elliott eyed the waving expanse of bone-dry grass to windward, his eyes troubled and filled with concern.

First sign of fire came from the southwest, a wisp of blue smoke drifting on the wind with that unmistakable smell to it, the smell of burning grass. Elliott broke across the compound and caught Captain Nison by one dusty sleeve. "Backfires, Captain. We'd better burn off the grass in the compound and just outside it!"

For an instant Reed thought the arrogant captain would be stubborn, only because the suggestion came from Elliott, but that stubborn thought seemed to die almost as it was born. He yelled, "Sergeant Aldrich!"

The sergeant crawled from beneath a wagon and approached at a shuffling run. The captain barked, "Get thirty or forty sacks. See that they're soaked good," and to Elliott, "Soon as they're ready, set your fires."

Elliott started in the center of the compound. As the fire reached the encircling wagons, it was beaten out, but the embers that glowed on the other side were allowed to burn. Within seconds a ten-foot wall of flame was racing away to the northeast. Now Elliott fired the grass at the windward side of the compound, and this fire reached the center and died of itself for lack of fuel.

The Utes must have seen in this activity the frustration of their plan, for they began a concentrated hail of rifle fire. Bullets whined and thudded into the compound, driving the men to shelter, to inactivity. But Nison was a man possessed. He was everywhere in the compound, yelling, striking, bullying. "Which is toughest, goddam you! A bullet or burning to death? Get up! Beat that fire out!"

Reed went with Sam out past the ring of wagons, the flaming spoke of a wagon wheel in his hand. Now, with this, the most dangerous backfire starting, the men with the soaked sacks waited at the wagons. Men slapped at embers that lit, burning, on their flesh. They choked, coughed, put their faces to the ground to breathe. As the backfire's flames reached the dead horses, to the smell of smoke was added the stench of burning hair and flesh. The horses on picket screamed and fought and tried to bolt. Among these, the last

remaining mounts, men moved with soothing voices, curses, and strong, restraining hands.

Ahead of the wall of flame racing down the meadow, came the heat, searing, drying, choking. Reed looked at Elliott and scarcely recognized him, for besides being blackened, Sam was entirely without hair or moustache or beard. Now came the smoke, great billowing clouds of it that blinded and choked and blotted out entirely the brightness of the sun. Reed shouted at Sam, three feet away, "If they came in now, they'd clean us out!"

Dimly he heard the bellowing of Nison, "Get off the ground! Get those sacks busy! You want to be burned alive?"

He kicked and bullied the troopers to their feet; he made them work in the heat that was so unbearable. Reed and Sam Elliott were among them, beating at die-hard embers with sacks that dried out immediately.

It was over almost as soon as it started. Wonderful, life-giving cool air blew across the scorched and blackened meadow land. But the Utes did not attack. Expecting to catch the soldiers by surprise, they were defeated when they saw no wagons burning, no soldiers frantically fleeing the flames.

After this there was quiet for a while and medical aid of a sort for the men who were badly burned. Gone was the beauty of this landscape, for there is something about the black scorched earth that depresses men and takes the hope out of them.

In late afternoon, Captain Dodge and his troop of colored cavalry came charging downslope toward the besieged camp, guidons streaming, bugles sounding the stirring notes of the charge. Forty men they were, mounted on roan horses.

Some of the men in Nison's command, believing this to be a general relief force, came from their holes, waving and cheering lustily. There was color and glory in that foolish charge, valor and disregard for personal safety.

The Utes were taken completely by surprise. Reed was amazed that the troop could have penetrated the Indians' lines without being discovered. But the Utes recovered quickly. Into the ranks of the galloping "Buffalo Soldiers" they laid a barrage that was accurate and deadly.

One by one the galloping horses catapulted violently as they were hit. Dazed troopers would claw to their feet, stumble on at a shuffling, limping run. Watching, Reed breathed with complete amazement, "Sam, look at the way those Indians are shooting. They haven't hit a man, but they've killed three-quarters of the horses."

The trail of the colored cavalry was plainly marked by the carcasses of their horses. They burst into the compound, seven or eight mounted men, followed by more than thirty afoot.

Theirs was not a welcome, but an ovation. The singed and blackened white troopers pounded backs and shook hands and chattered until they were hoarse. Only the continuous and accurate sniping finally drove them back to cover.

The handful of horses which had entered the compound unhurt were put on picket with the others. Nison and Captain Dodge squatted beside a wagon fifteen feet from where Elliott and Reed now lay.

Nison said, "I'm glad to see you, sir."

Dodge, with thinly veiled disapproval, replied, "It must have been obvious to you that I could not help with forty men. Why did you send for me? Why didn't you send to Rawlins for help?"

Reed could see the sullenness creeping over Nison's handsome face. "Since you're here," he said, curtly, "I'll turn this command over to you."

Nison walked away before Dodge could reply. Sam Elliott and Reed who had watched the scene, crawled to where Dodge lay. Elliott managed a sort of careless salute, and said, "I'm Sam Elliott, Captain. The major's civilian guide. This is Quentin Reed, operator of the freight line into White River Agency. I reckon you're figgerin' on sendin' out a message. I reckon I kin take it for you."

Dodge fixed sharp, shrewd eyes on Elliott, then shifted his glance to Reed. Reed could still feel the unusual warmth in the ground, and sat up, putting his back against the wheel of the wagon. He knew he made a villainous appearance, black and singed and tired.

Elliott hastily interjected, "I'd like to take Reed with me. He's a fighter, Captain."

"Think you can make it, the two of you?"

Elliott shrugged. "Tryin' ain't no worse than stayin' here."
"All right. Take your pick of the horses."

"Huh-uh. We'll go afoot. We'll pick up some Ute ponies once we git clear."

Reed could feel the rebirth of hope in his heart. An exhilaration ran through his body and a hot, quick anticipation. Dodge scribbled a note and handed it to Sam. "Get what you need at the mess wagon. Leave whenever you're ready."

"It'll be dark afore I'm ready, Captain." Sam crawled away, and Reed rolled over to follow, but stopped short at the sharp ring of Nison's voice across the compound. "All right! Let's go!"

His eyes snapped toward the sound of the voice. Suddenly, forgetting Utes, he bounded to his feet, not a second ahead of stocky, powerful Captain Dodge. Dodge yelled, "Nison, damn it, Nison, come back herel!"

Nison, at the head of twenty or more Negro troopers, was running out of the compound, through the scorched and smoldering grass. In his hand was a long-barreled Army Colt.

Elliott, ten feet away, snorted savagely, "Ain't changed a mite, the knucklehead. But it won't be him that gits kilt. It'll be all them fellas that's foolish enough an' got guts enough to go with him!"

Dodge, turning frantic, yelled again, "God damn you, Nison! Come back herel!"

Without knowing it, the three had moved across the compound. Now, in the hail of fire from timber and ridgetops, a Negro fell, another stumbled, got up and ran ten feet before he fell and lay still.

Elliott mumbled, "Oh, damn him! Damn him to hell! Why don't his kind never stop a bullet?"

An enormous Dominican stepped softly to Dodge's side, and Dodge almost screamed at him, "Shoot him! Kill him! Shoot that officer!"

From force of habit, the Dominican raised his rifle as though to obey the command, but then he hesitated. "Shoot who, suh?" His deep voice was incredulous.

"Shoot that officer, you fool! You want to see them all murdered?" Still the Negro hesitated, and Dodge made as

though to snatch the rifle from him. Already Nison and his attacking Negroes were two hundred yards away. Reed could scarcely breathe as he waited for the rifle's splitting thunder. It came, and Nison pitched to the ground as though clubbed from behind.

Dodge leaped atop a wagon, waving and yelling, "Come back! Damn it, come back or I'll cut your hearts out!"

Leaderless, the troopers hesitated. Another of their number clawed at his throat and fell, writhing on the blackened ground. With a rush they came then, running like frightened deer.

Reed released a long, gusty sigh. Sam Elliott's voice was dry and without emotion. "Well, by God, them are the last soldiers that son-of-a-bitch will murder." He drifted toward the other side of the compound and Reed reluctantly followed.

An hour later, with the sun down and soft blue dusk creeping stealthily across the land, Reed and Elliott crawled to where Dodge sat brooding.

He turned haunted eyes on Sam and Reed, murmuring, "I did it to save what was left of them."

Elliott touched his hat and spoke. "You done right, too, Captain. Ain't nobody goin' t' blame you." He paused, saying at last, "We're ready. We'll leave soon's it's full dark." He was scarcely recognizable as Sam Elliott with his hair gone, his face and clothing blackened from crawling on the charred ground.

Already Reed's mind was rushing forward, down the dim trails to White River Indian Agency, conjecturing over what he would find there. He took Dodge's short, thick hand, gripped it. He said, "Good-bye, Captain."

Then they were crawling out past the wagons, across the open ground where there was no concealment.

Elliott went in the lead, Reed kept close enough behind so that his forward reaching hands could at any time touch Sam's boots. He had left his rifle behind, but the sagging weight of the .44 in its holster was comforting.

He was grateful when they reached the fringe of brush and timber at the edge of the clearing, for here they could stand.

Now, however, the danger of discovery was greatly multiplied. It was here in the timber that the Utes would be.

Elliott squeezed his forearm and moved away, slowly, toward the northwest, driving ever deeper into the timber. Once they skirted a small clearing in which a tiny fire winked. Reed could see a dozen braves motionless in their blankets beside the fire.

Again, a quarter mile further along, they blundered into a group of grazing ponies, backed hastily as the horses scented them and commenced to fidget and nicker.

A full mile northwest of the besieged camp, they halted. Sam Elliott whispered, "Now we got to find hosses."

These were the words Reed had been waiting for. Elliott led off, quartering back and forth across the road, like a hound questing a scent. After twenty minutes of this, Sam halted at the edge of the road, crouching deep in the brush. He drew Reed down beside him. "Sounds like two or three comin' up the road," he whispered softly. "Git you a big rock. Don't shoot less'n you have to."

The seconds ran on and the slow beat of the horses' walking feet became plainer. Reed pawed around, locating finally a rock that filled his hand and hefted nicely. He shifted his position slightly, drawing his feet under him, tensing throughout his body as a spring grows taut under pressure.

Elliott poked him. Looming above him to the north was the bulk of an approaching horse, simply a blacker blob in the black of the night. Reed rose, softly silent, to his feet, feeling the movement of Elliott beside him. His would be the lead horse, Elliott's the one behind. If there were three or more, shooting and pursuit would be an inevitability.

Sensing, rather than hearing or seeing Elliott's abrupt movement, he drew back, flung the rock with terrific speed and power, directly at the upright splash of black looming above the horse. He heard the rock strike home, heard Elliott's rock clang against metal at the same instant. Then he bounded out onto the road, thinking now of nothing, concentrating only on reaching that toppling Ute and dragging him from the saddle.

He seized the buckskin-clad leg, twisting and yanking all at once, heard the yell of surprised anguish from the Ute. The horse spooked up along the trail with rapid galloping hoofs,

and the fleeting thought crossed Reed's mind, "He'll stop before he goes a quarter mile," even as he rolled in the dust of the road with the wiry and powerful Indian. Sounds of another struggle nearby entered his ears and his consciousness. The second horse stepped on his leg as it passed, bringing an involuntary yell of pain from his lips.

He clubbed his fists against the Ute's head and neck, knees gripping the savage's body. Sharp knife steel grazed his arm and in wild desperation he searched for the knife hand with both his own in that split second of life that remained to him.

Panic touched him, then suddenly he had the Ute's wrist in both of his hands with only a cut palm to show for his groping. Putting all of his strength into this, he brought the Ute's hand downward, holding firm the knife, and felt it plunge to the hilt into the Indian's chest, catching on a rib, but slipping off easily.

The Ute gave a last, spasmodic heave, throwing Reed clear. He uttered a deep, grunting sigh and lay still. Reed rose and toed the still form roughly. He turned. A dark form, crouching, moved toward him and he called urgently, "Sam? That you, Sam?"

A voice from behind this figure said in muffled tones, "I'm over here. That's a Injun, Reed. Take him!"

Reed drew his gun, leaped aside swiftly as the brave closed with him. Whirling, he brought the heavy Colt's barrel slashing downward, heard the peculiar sound it made as it glanced off the Ute's skull. But the man went down and Reed leaped upon him feet first, landing in the brave's mid-section, driving the wind from him with an explosive grunt. Now, dropping, he felt for the man's head and when he found it, reversed his gun and brought the butt of it down twice with sickening force.

Rising, he ran back along the trail, panicked by the fear that Elliott might be hurt and that he would have to forsake his trip to the Agency and instead take the message north. But Sam, stumbling to his feet, called with rueful good humor, "Dunno what that Injun hit me with, but it was sure solid. Put a egg on my head big as your fist."

Reed let the relief run through him unchecked, saying, "Let's get the horses."

He dragged the two bodies out of the road, and together he and Sam Elliott ran up toward the pass. A dim lightening in the sky showed them the two small horses, grazing unconcernedly not a hundred yards beyond. Five minutes later, Reed gripped Sam's hand wordlessly and set out on his own, westward way, while Sam rode boldly northward along the road.

Sam could afford to ride boldly, for the worst he was likely to encounter were two or three Indian scouts. But Reed, heading deep into the Utes' stronghold, kept the short pony at a walk, and threw his hat away so that his silhouette might not so clearly brand him as a white man.

This was a hard and difficult route, westward through these mountains, but the easy way, the road, would now be swarming with braves traveling to and from the battleground. By force of will, Reed stopped the functioning of his active mind. What happened from here on must be planned from minute to minute, for he had no slightest inkling of what he was riding into.

Chapter 16

DAWN FOUND Quentin Reed crouched above White River Indian Agency, crouched in the thin sagebrush atop one of the hills.

He had been there more than two hours, waiting for daylight, praying that the place was intact, that soon he could rush down and take her in his arms. As the sky turned slate gray, he could see the irregular outlines of objects down there, objects which might be buildings, or which might be only their remains.

By the time there was light enough to see clearly what had happened, his eyes were burning from strain. Bloodshot they were, and now they glowed with hate and rage and unbearable pain. Beneath the soot that covered him, his face turned white. His hands trembled.

Not forgetting caution even in this terrible moment, he crept down the slope, wormed noiselessly through the high brush immediately above what had been the Agency.

There was nothing here. Just blackened embers, twisted pieces of machinery, a rake, a mowing machine, a plow. Yes, there was something else. There were bodies which had lain here for the wolves to gnaw and the buzzards to tear. He found them by following the sweet, sickening smell of decaying flesh.

Death was no stranger to Quentin Reed. Even so, to see kindly old Nathan Meeker sprawled there made Reed pause to grip his nerves.

Leaving this, frantically running, Reed quested back and forth through the ruins, kneeling now and again to more closely examine some decaying thing that had once been human. Relief began to run through Reed. He had looked at half a dozen bodies. Yet even this relief shamed him, for these were

men of peace, and it was doubtful if they had fired many shots in their own defense.

Still Reed did not leave, but circled about, and finally picked up the trail the Utes had taken days before, the trail that crossed the river and headed south toward the Grand River wilderness. Another, plainer trail, one that made his task difficult, a trail that overlay the one he sought, he ignored, for he knew what it was and why. It was the broad, beaten path of a thousand cattle passing within a stone's throw of the decaying body of Meeker.

Once he flung himself to the ground, burrowing into a pile of brush, and watched the laughing passage of three braves, attired in parts of blue U. S. Cavalry uniforms. They splashed across the river, took the winding trail southward. One of them was huge, fat, blustering Colorow. Reed's hands twitched with their need to be at the Ute's throat. In the end he lay still. When the Indians had passed out of earshot, he ran back up the hill to where his pony was tied. He mounted, and loped southward until he could smell the dust raised by the three hanging over the trail.

Now he left this trail, paralleling it as far as was possible, a quarter mile away. This was a thing he had to do first, before all else. He must find Carlie. When that was done, God willing, he would take that cattle trail and he would kill James Bragg Otis with his bare hands.

Upward wound this valley, steeply, ending somewhere in the mist-shrouded distance. On the right, distantly, he could see the cliffs. To his left lay an unending hog-back, its ridge like the bony spine of some slumbering razorback. The sun beat down with increasing heat as the morning advanced, and the air grew thin as he gained altitude.

At noon he topped this pass, and could look downward, seeing not the river, but its gorge and the plateau that rose beyond it. He did not eat, for he had nothing, but he dropped at a spring and drank, and splashed the icy water over his grimy face and scalp. Then he left his pony, crossing to the main trail, smiling grimly at his findings. He preceded Colorow and his two companions. So here he would wait.

Back at White River, he had not attacked Colorow and the others because he could not know how near were other In-

dians. Up here, he could feel safer. There would be no other Indians within a too dangerous distance behind. There would be none to surprise him from the other side, for he could see a bend in that trail nearly a mile away. He would watch this while he waited for Colorow.

A suggestion tried to assert itself in his mind, something that would be pleasant if he recognized it. It finally found thought and Reed began to feel better. "If Colorow has been at Yellow Jacket Pass all this time, then maybe Carlie's safe. Every Indian in the tribe knew he was after her. Would they dare to touch her, knowing she was Colorow's special property?"

The answer to this was simple then. Kill Colorow, but be sure to kill the others as well, for if one of them escaped and carried the news that Colorow was dead—

Lying motionless in the midst of this golden sarvus and dusty dry grass, fatigue crept over him, numbing his thoughts to dim awarenesses. He could hear the chipmunks, quieted by his coming, beginning to stir busily again. Farther away, he could hear the startled jumping of a deer as it came upon his horse and fled in fear. There was the distant harsh cawing of a flock of ravens, wheeling over the book-like cliffs. The sky above was blue with lazily shifting puffs of cloud drifting across its wide expanse. The vague and restless thought, "God, what a country! A man could be king here," came and went.

He heard the ring of bare hoofs against rock northward on the trail, and watching, saw the first of the Utes rounding a bend in the trail.

With movements stealthy in the extreme, he slid his hand back, eased the Colt from its worn holster. The Utes were laughing and conversing rapidly in their own tongue. Colorow, in the rear, spoke only once, his words patently an exhortation to hurry.

Reed slid the long-barreled pistol ahead of him, lined his sights on the Ute riding in the middle. The first would spur toward him. Colorow, being a chief, would come on, too, would scorn a safe and easy retreat. So he would get them all, barring accidents and bad shooting.

Nearer the Utes came until he could see their yellowed

teeth, the expressions on their faces. Shooting from ambush for the first time in his life, he squeezed off the trigger. The resulting roar drove the Utes' ponies back on their haunches, but one of their saddles was empty.

Again Reed shot, uncertain of his aim because of the plunging pony. His shot missed, and as he had expected, the Indian drove directly at the ambush. Now Reed scrambled to his feet and raised the gun again to eye level. This time he felt more sure, and fired, diving aside barely in time to escape the plunging horse's hoofs. The Ute, flinging himself at Reed, knife in hand, bowled him over, rolled past him and stopped, dead from Reed's bullet. Reed swung the gun to take Colorow.

But the trail twisted emptily northward, and all that was left of Colorow was the sound he made as his horse plunged through the brush. Later by several minutes, Reed saw him galloping down that visible part of the trail, dust rising in a cloud behind him.

Cursing himself bitterly for misjudging the man, Reed stripped the trousers from the larger of the two dead braves, donned them hastily. He found a can of red, oil-base paint labeled by a New Jersey manufacturer, in the pocket of these and took enough precious time to smear his face with it in exactly the same pattern as that of the dead Ute.

Then he leaped to the back of a strong, pinto mare, drumming her sides with his heels until she stretched out in a run. Hastily glanced at, he would pass for an Indian. Now, from here on, there could be no more skulking through the brush. No time remained for that. He would ride these trails openly. He would ride now until he reached the Utes' camp.

Colorow was ahead of him, Colorow whom Carlie feared more than any other thing. Colorow would waste no time when he arrived at the camp where Carlie was held. Reed's insides churned and his brain turned sick. Tearing a branch from a sarvus bush as he passed, he belabored the mare's rump with it, kicking her sides, cursing her all this while.

Chapter 17

IN LATE AFTERNOON Reed came to Grand River, to its brushy and grass-covered valley, his horse lathered, wheezing, almost finished. Here the trail turned westward, between monstrous, soaring cliffs that were sheer and magnificent.

This was the river which lazed westward and south to find its way through Utah desert, through mile-high Grand Canyon in Arizona. It traversed here a virgin land, unseen through the ages by any except savages and perhaps a handful of whites. At any other time, Reed would have loved it, would have been monstrously stirred by its savage grandeur. Now, however, he whipped and cursed the spent mare through it, giving it no more than a passing glance. The sun sank lower toward the horizon and at last dropped from sight.

Only a little way beyond where a narrow, clear stream joins Grand River from the north, he came upon their camp. It was now dark and he rode to it boldly, toward the fires that winked openly, without fear of discovery.

As he slipped from his horse well clear of this camp's limits, Reed felt his terrible helplessness, knowing nothing of the Ute tongue, not knowing whether Carlie was being held here, or further downriver, or hidden away in some secret canyon. He knew this, that Colorow had ridden westward when he first reached Grand River. A mile beyond there, he had lost the chief's trail in the myriad other prints, not pausing to relocate it, feeling that blind speed would be now more effective than caution and careful trailing.

As close as a hundred yards he approached openly, then slipped behind a clump of brush.

Squaws squatted impassively beside their stew pots, and naked children scampered back and forth, squealing and rolling in the camp's dust. A pair of dogs quarreled over a

scrap from one of the pots, snarling, while still another dog slipped in and stole the scrap. Dogs. This was a thing Reed had not considered, but his abrupt disquietude dispelled itself as he eyed the drift of smoke from the fires toward him.

A single brave lounged beside one of the fires, poking idly at the embers with a stick. "Where are the others?" wondered Reed, growing frantic at the passage of time.

Ten full minutes he squatted here, missing no detail of the camp's activity, hearing at last the noisy approach of the Ute hunting party. Into the camp they streamed, mounted, bearing deer across their horses in front of them.

The squaws rose from their pots, helped to lift down the gray carcasses, set to work at skinning. The braves, five in all, turned their ponies over to the camp's youths, and ravenously began feeding themselves from the steaming pots.

Emptiness clawed at Reed's stomach, the hunger of twenty-four hours of travel. Another emptiness, one more terrible, gnawed inside his chest. She wasn't here. She was in some other camp, hidden God knows where, and already Colorow was there.

He rose to carefully ease himself away and was nearly ridden down by a Ute who pounded past entirely unmindful of his presence.

This was Colorow, whose bulk was unmistakable, whom some way Reed had passed en route downriver. Hailed with respect by all in the camp, Colorow paused, but Reed followed the direction of pointing fingers, of leering grins, then rose and circled the camp, coming stealthily upon the grazing ponies. A single boy, nearly grown, guarded these. Reed slipped to within fifteen feet of him and then, fearing his passage over this unfamiliar ground might be heard, rushed in, bearing the boy backward, stifling his half-uttered cry with a heavy, clamping hand.

Reed dealt the necessary blow and felt the laxness in the youth's body. He found bridles, caught two of the horses, led them back to his previous stand and tied them. She was here! He was not too late!

That he faced six braves and Colorow and a campful of squaws who would fight like men bothered him not at all.

Turning, he saw that Colorow was gone, saw also that all

in the camp watched, grinning, the entrance to one of the tepees. He could not know of Carlie's knife, of her bitter determination to kill Colorow before allowing him to touch her. But he knew Carlie's fear, could clearly picture her wide violet eyes, horror-filled, and he lost all sense of caution, of prudence and charged into the camp like an enraged and wounded wolf.

Entering the distinct circle of the camp's light, he paused, shooting a half-raised gun, and watched two of the braves stumble backward. One of them lay still, but the other began crawling toward one of the tepees.

Reed rammed the gun back into its holster, running forward, charged against a muscular brave just as that one raised a Winchester to shoot. His body knocked the barrel aside, his hands clamped on its short barrel. Twisting, he threw his body sideways, letting its weight tear the rifle from the Ute's grasp.

Momentum pitched him headlong. The Utes sprang at him, knives in hand. Reed rolled, hampered by the rifle which he would not release. Now the animal ferocity possessed him and he did not even feel the sharp blade that raked his back and came away. He stumbled to his feet, crouched a moment, then charged into the untangling pile of braves who had sought to pin him down. The rifle he swung as a club. Its backward swing caught a brave who had slipped behind him. Coming forward, its walnut stock broke with the force of its swing as it connected with a hard Ute head.

Two of the six braves lay on the ground before him. Another had disappeared into a tepee, the wounded one who had crawled away. Still another lay stretched out on the ground, stupidly trying to roll over.

Reed yanked his glance left, toward the tepee where he knew Colorow and Carlie must be. A rifle exploded a foot from his face, blinding him, deafening him. His ears ringing, blood from a raked furrow streaming into his eyes, he swung the broken rifle, only the short, clubbed barrel, and heard the bone in the Indian's arm snap. With a howl, the Ute dropped his rifle. Reed jumped, scooped it up, running now toward the tepee.

He heard a yell of rage and pain. Colorow burst from the

tepee with blood streaming from a deep gash on the side of his neck.

Under the extreme stimulus of this swift action, Reed shouted with laughter. It was wild laughter that struck terror to the hearts of the remaining unhurt Utes. Hardly recognizable as human was Reed, bloody and black, without hair, with scarcely any clothes remaining to him.

Painted like a Ute, muscular and bronzed, his jet beard, what remained unsinged, branded him a white. Perhaps the beard was what reassured Carlie as she came through the tepee's entrance. Perhaps she recognized him. Her golden hair was a tangled mass, her face was dirty and bore new bruises. Her dress hung to her body in shreds.

Reed shouted, "Are you all right? Can you travel?"

She nodded wordlessly. He grabbed her hand, dragging her after him as he lunged toward the dark at the edge of camp, toward the two horses he had tied there.

The Utes had rallied, and rushed at him with Colorow among them. Now, however, the odds were reduced. There were only three, one with a broken right arm that dangled uselessly, Colorow bleeding profusely, and one other, unwounded, who dropped to a knee to fire.

Roughly, Reed thrust Carlie aside, from a corner of his eye saw her trip, sprawl into the dust. He snapped his rifle to shoulder level, taking time to be careful, and fired just as the Ute fired. He felt a smashing blow in his shoulder. He saw a spot appear on the Ute's forehead before the Indian was driven backward by the bullet's force.

Without time to club the rifle and swing, he jabbed its barrel viciously into Colorow's paunchy middle, then brought it back to deal the death blow. But the Ute with the broken arm was behind the chief and came in, knife held in his left hand. Reed let him have the blow intended for Colorow, and would have dealt another to the retching, staggering chief but for Carlie's scream and her tugging hands against him.

"The squaws! Come on!"

Yanking her behind this tepee for a little shelter against bullets, Reed pulled her along. Pitying her weakness, he scooped her into his arms, letting the rifle fall.

This way they came to the tethered horses. He flung her

across the back of one, steadying her, asking urgently, "You sure you're all right? Can you stay up there? We'll have to ride fast."

She only nodded, still wordless, still dazed by the swiftness of events. With a sinking feeling, Reed thought of the other women, Sophronia Price, Josephine Meeker, Mrs. Meeker. He said quickly, "The others? Where are the other women?"

"I don't know. They took them downriver yesterday."

Reed leaped astride the horse, holding to the reins of Carlie's mount. Excitement had entered these horses, turned them nervous and fidgety. With little urging from Reed, they lined out toward the west at a dead run, seeming to avoid the arroyos and brush pockets that laced this valley with uncanny precision.

With this rough motion, this jolting and swerving, Reed became conscious of his wounds. His back burned where the knife had marked it, his left arm began to numb from the bullet wound, and pain coursed from the wound to his fingertips. "Not broken though," he murmured, "Or I wouldn't have been able to use it." His head throbbed and ached with excruciating pain and odd, colored spots danced before his eyes.

He called softly, "We'll have to stop for a minute," and reined in his horse. Warm blood ran down his arm, his back, and his strength ran out of the wounds with it.

Helping Carlie down, he whispered, "Tear some strips from your dress. I've got a knife cut on my back and a hole in my arm. I can't afford to lose that blood."

"Where are you hurt? Is it bad?" Carlie's hands were tender, moving over his body. She found the wounds. He heard the sound of tearing cloth. Forgetting these wounds, forgetting everything but the soft sound of her voice, the tenderness it held, he caught at her, pulled her close to him.

His lips found hers, warm and soft and yielding. Gently she disengaged herself. "Not now. Oh, not now. Let me stop your bleeding."

The strips of cloth she bound around him and she tied up the open wound in his shoulder. "They'll fester," she cried, a sob catching at her throat. "The cloth is too dirty."

"Maybe they won't have time. Let's go."

He lifted her to her horse and, wincing, mounted his own. Now they spared these horses, walking and trotting, occasionally letting them out to a run. Past winking fires of three other camps they moved, hearing no sound of pursuit. Carlie held her own reins, following closely ten or fifteen feet behind.

Two hours they traveled before they heard the sound of pursuit. Panic struck through Reed. There was weakness in him, weariness, and ravening hunger. The will to battle had gone. His instincts now told him to escape, to hide.

Carlie seemed to recognize this in him for she said, very softly, "You can't fight them again. We've got to get away."

"Where? Up those cliffs?" His bitterness silenced her if only for a moment.

"There might be a way."

Glancing right and left, he scanned the dimly lighted unreality of monstrous stone faces. Half a mile they rose from the floor of this valley, half this distance in steep, shaly slides, the balance in perpendicular rimrock. Above the rim, the dark fringe of giant spruces was a thin, black border.

Reed shrugged, "Climbing that isn't possible. I guess getting away from the Indians by riding ahead of them isn't possible either." He slipped from his horse with the faint sounds of the pursuit a quarter mile behind. Carlie slid off beside him. Reed slipped the bridles from the horses, viciously quirted their rumps with the reins.

As the horses pounded away from them, the two moved soundlessly through the brush, and heard the pursuit pass before they were three hundred yards from the creek.

An endless distance this seemed, upward always through twisted, giant cedars until the cedars thinned out to nothing. There was the slide, thinly grassed and exceedingly steep. Only scattered brush clumps made it possible for them to continue their clawing upward way. Weakness turned Reed's legs to rubber. His wounds were a fiery agony.

Carlie slowed, but did not complain, nor would she allow Reed to help her.

Light increased as the clouds continued to thin. Somewhere between midnight and dawn, they reached the foot of the rim. It was here that the moon slipped from behind the clouds.

Below stretched a panorama of weird beauty. Reed had no

eyes for it. He pulled her down beside him, panting as was she, and pointed across the canyon at the opposite rim. "Look. There are places where the rims are high like they are here. But see off to the right? There's a place where the rim thins out almost to nothing. If we could find a place like that over here, we might be able to climb out on top."

Carlie was watching him wordlessly. He took her hand, squeezed it briefly. "Come on, then."

Now traveling was easier, almost level even, as they paralleled the foot of this steep cliff, climbing only slightly. As they walked, Reed began to realize that they were on a sort of point of land, on a jutting section of this plateau. Hope began to stir in his heart.

A full hour brought them clear around this point, to a depression in the rimrock. The footing became treacherous as they clawed along crumbling, shaly ledges, always rising a little, taking every ledge that promised to lead toward the top. Working in darkness, sheltered by the cliff from the moon, Reed found what he sought at last, an eroded ravine leading up through the rimrock at a place where it was no more than twenty-five feet high. Upward through this gash he pulled himself, reaching back every three or four feet to pull Carlie after him.

This was an eternity of struggle, of effort, that did not seem possible. When at last it was finished, when they crawled exhausted out on top, still he would not rest. He lifted Carlie to her feet and together they staggered the remaining quarter mile to comparatively level ground.

Exhaustion held them quiet there, lying side by side on the deep bed of yellow aspen leaves. In sleep, a faint smile curved the corners of Carlie's lips and she burrowed closer to him like a child seeking warmth and comfort.

Chapter 18

THE PAIN in his wounds and the bitter chill of high-country dawn woke Reed, shivering. Carlie trembled with the cold at his side. Grogginess held him immobile for a full five minutes while his mind traced its way backward over the past day and night.

During those five waking minutes, he had listened intently for sound of Ute marauder, had heard none, but in spite of this still moved with the utmost care and caution. He gathered aspen twigs and branches, dry, dead ones, for these would burn with little smoke. After the fire, would necessarily come food, meaning a shot, a noise that could be heard clear to the bottom of the valley. "A chance I'll have to take," he muttered. "We can't travel far without eating."

He built the fire and lighted it, noting that a mere dozen matches remained. While the fire was catching, he rolled a smoke, the first in nearly twenty-four hours, lighting it by kneeling and thrusting his face into the crackling flames.

With the fire started, he gently wakened Carlie. Her glance was at once startled and fearful, but rapidly relaxed into a smile. She said, "I thought I'd lost you, and blamed myself. Now you're here."

Reed tangled his fingers in her golden hair, then stood up brusquely and said, "Time to get up, lazy-bones. I'm going to hustle up some food. We can't travel far without eating. You keep the fire going, and don't let it go out—we're short of matches. I'll be back soon." She watched him as he prowled down the side of a shallow ridge, walking quietly.

Before he had gone a mile, he saw a small buck feeding in a clump of aspen along with a doe and two yearlings. Crouching, he crept closer.

He carefully raised the gun and fired. One of the yearlings

dropped, the others bounded uphill on stiffly rigid legs. Reed skinned out a quarter, turning altogether frightened as he finished, at the cold sweat this small exertion caused in him, at the waves of nausea and weakness that swept over him.

Straining to do this, he hoisted the hindquarter to his shoulder, and toiled back uptrail to where he had left Carlie. Perhaps the food would help. He rested ten minutes and then brought her the quarter of meat. He laid it down, built a fire of dead aspen. When it had reduced itself to coals, they broiled steaks over it on sticks. Except for the ever-present fear of the Utes, except for Reed's increasing weakness, this became like a picnic outing.

Thoughts of Otis kept intruding and at last he said, "Otis stole the herd of Agency cattle and drove them west down White River. He's probably holed up somewhere in Utah changing brands right now. I'll take you to Rawlins, then I've got to get back and find him."

"Why do you have to find him? Let the Government do it. You're in no condition—"

"I've got to do it."

"Because he stole the cattle?" Coolness failed to conceal itself entirely in her voice. Loving her, Reed could not be angry with her, but he could feel a certain irritation.

"I don't give a damn about the cattle. But because he wanted the cattle he sparked this rebellion; because he wanted the cattle, Meeker is dead and so are a hundred others. The Government won't even miss those cattle for months. By that time, Otis will either have them rebranded, or he'll dispose of them. There'll be no proof. He'll go scot free. But I know what he's done. He won't get away from me." He was standing now, talking with vehemence, feeling the rise of his hatred for Otis.

"Will you take him to Rawlins, to the authorities?" Carlie had risen too, stood now very close, looking up at him.

"Will he let me? Will he throw down his gun and surrender?"

"You know he won't. Suppose he kills you? Don't you ever think you might lose a fight because someone was treacherous and crafty? Now that I've found you, I want to keep you."

Still the streak of stubbornness persisted in Reed. His face

was hard with it, and his eyes would not meet hers. Angry now, Carlie cried "Is it for Meeker that you hate him or for me? Do you want him to pay, or do you want him out of the way?"

Rage stirred now in Reed, dying almost at once as he admitted to himself, "How can she be sure of me when I am not sure of myself?"

Throughout the morning they plodded northward, wordless, weary, preoccupied with their own bitter thoughts. Reed sought all this time the answer to his insatiable thirst for vengeance. Had his need been born at White River Agency as he viewed the bodies there, or had it been born sooner, because of Carlie? On the answer to this question depended his and Carlie's future happiness, for kill Otis he must and if he killed for Carlie, their love could not help but be soiled and degraded.

In the middle of the afternoon they paused, and Reed built another fire, feeling almost safe but having to force an appearance of strength. Again they broiled steaks over glowing coals, again they stuffed themselves to repletion before they continued on their way.

Across the undulating plateau they plodded while the sun traveled relentlessly, to sink in the void past Grand River, past even the monstrous mesa that towered to the west and south. Reed seemed to be in a sort of daze during the latter part of the afternoon, and knew he was weakening fast because now more often Carlie walked beside him, holding his arm, steadying him.

He was without the strength to protest when she took the partly eaten quarter of venison from him.

"How much farther is it to White River?" Carlie asked of him toward sundown.

His laugh was harsh and bitter, more so than he had intended. "Four, five days of travel. Three more westward to where Otis is. A week more to Rawlins. If we could get horses—"

As soon as the sun went down the air took on a chill, but they did not pause again until dusk. It was Carlie who gathered wood and built the fire. It was she who gathered spruce

boughts for their bed and who laughed too often to conceal her rising terror.

This night their sleep was restless and broken because of the bitter cold that seemed to sift into this country from the higher ranges, from the early snows even now blanketing their granite peaks.

This night was the last that Reed knew clearly. In the morning he was delirious. He knew throughout the next five days only brief periods of comprehension, of awareness that Carlie was near. The battle he fought now was perhaps the fiercest he had ever fought, and he derived little satisfaction from it. But he would not leave Carlie. He doubted her ability to make her way to civilization. It was well he doubted, for doubt gave him the will to fight. Carlie found enough strength to kill and skin a deer, to carry it in quarters back to camp. She found the strength to bring him water twenty times a day, water absorbed in a scrubbed-thin scrap of her dress.

On the morning of the sixth day, his fever dropped and his head was clear. On the seventh, they journeyed nearly a mile. On the tenth they cut the old but unmistakable sign of Otis' cattle and turned westward. Reed had grown thin, but he was strong again.

Only Carlie doubted, for only she knew the brute power that was in Otis and the unscrupulousness. As they walked the miles away, the dark foreboding grew in her. It was as though she walked toward a precipice and could not stop.

Chapter 19

THE DAYS continued to be warm, but the passage of time warned Reed that this could not long continue. One day in this high country would come clouds, low and black, scudding from the north. One day would come bitter wind, snow and sleet. Carlie was clad only in the rags that remained of her thin dress. He himself had only the frayed trousers and the boots he had taken from the Ute brave.

He was possessed by a grim eagerness as they plodded day after day along the broad trail left by the cattle. He worried little about losing it, for no rain, nothing short of deep snow, could blot it out.

There came a day when they reached the farthest rim of the plateau and could look downward, could see newly erected corrals, a shack of logs roofed with sod, smoke rising from a fire, a handful of cattle being driven into the corral by a hulking, bearded man.

Down through the rim they went, and the descent was easier by far than the ascent had been. Traveling cautiously, they reached the cedars, still descending, and at last stood in green concealment no farther than a quarter mile from Otis' new log cabin.

Now Reed could plainly make out the figures of Otis and Piah. Otis had constructed an odd sort of chute, and into this the cattle were crowded.

Tension plucked at Reed, tension and eagerness, and he made a move to step into the open. Carlie clutched at him. "Do you really think he'll let you get within pistol range? I tell you I know him. He'd snatch up a rifle and shoot until he killed you, before you were even close enough to hit him with your gun."

Reed had to admit that she was right. Yet now he was here,

now he gazed upon the man he had promised himself would pay.

Carlie still held him by his arm. "You're not as strong as he. You must at least meet him on equal terms."

Otis was turning the cattle out of the corral, and at this distance, in the clear air, both Reed and Carlie could hear and understand his faint words.

"That's the last of them! We're finished!"

It was late afternoon, and across the sky came a thin haze of cloud, hurried and chased by a wind that was damp and cool and strong. Otis, Piah, and the three Indian youths left the corral and made their way to the cabin. Chilled and shivering, Reed and Carlie watched for nearly half an hour. Finally the three Ute boys came out, mounted their ponies and rode south at a slow trot.

Reed said, "Sending them back to the tribe. We've got to have that cabin before night or freeze."

Again he started out of the fringing timber, but this time it was not Carlie who stopped him. Otis came bursting out, running, and went to the corral. Mounting, he galloped away along the trail the Utes had taken. And no sooner was he out of sight than Piah slipped out, mounted her horse and followed. Reed laughed, "Come on," he said.

Together, laughing, they hurried to the cabin and burst inside. But Reed would not pause, even to warm himself. He moved back toward the door, saying, "Stay here. I'll be back before too long."

"No. I'm going with you. Quentin, listen to me. He doesn't think as you do. He doesn't fight as you do." Her arms slipped about his waist, holding, caressing, pleading. "Let me go with you."

He kissed her, prying away her hands. His voice was uncompromising, his features for the first time, hard. "No. This is my job. You stay here."

He opened the door, peering out from cautious habit. It was almost an illusion, those flakes of snow, so few, so tiny. But snow it was, unmistakably. Carlie ran across the room and yanked a ragged jacket down from a nail. "Put this on." She was smiling now, determinedly, though her irritation at this man's stubbornness was plain. "Be careful."

Reed was outside then, grateful for the jacket's warmth. He caught a horse from the corral, bridling it, but scorning saddle. In only an instant he was out of sight of the cabin, pounding along, following the plain tracks of the horses which had preceded him.

Not more than two miles south, he cut away from the trail, following this time the tracks of Otis' mount, overlaid by those of Piah's, both galloping and very distinct. Still he would not believe the black suspicion that crawled through his mind. No man, not even Otis, could be so treacherous, so depraved.

Perhaps five more miles he traveled, all this at a full run. Suddenly, very abruptly, he reined in. No more than a hundred yards ahead of him sounded the sharp crack of a rifle.

Reed's mouth turned down at its corners, his eyes narrowed with disgust. This was a trick as old as it was rotten. Use your accomplices, then kill them.

A second shot sounded. Sure he would be too late, but feeling obligated to make this gesture, this futile attempt to save the last youth's life, Reed forced the horse again to a run, dodging frantically, clinging low to the animal's neck to avoid brush and low-hanging branches.

He burst into a small clearing, almost overrunning the form of Piah, who stood motionless, watching Otis atop a pile of rocks a hundred yards away. Off to the left, Reed glimpsed an Indian youth, running, two more motionless on the ground. He bellowed, "Otis! You murdering coyote!" A squall of snow hit the clearing, great cottony flakes, thickly blown upon the wind.

Half suspecting treachery, Reed flung a wary glance at Piah. She stood motionless, her face a mask of horror. "There will be no trouble from her," he thought. "Not for me at least," and went on. Soaked and blinded by these huge, soft flakes of snow, he lost sight of the Ute boy. Apparently Otis did not, for another last shot cracked. Reed left his horse at the foot of the rockpile, and began the scrambling ascent. He was acutely aware of the danger. Otis was up there, rifle in hand, motionless, watching, while Reed was unable to give much attention to anything but the rapidly icing rocks. He thought of Carlie's words, "You must at least meet him on equal terms," and smiled grimly. Hardly equal, this. Above

him the rifle cracked. A shower of powdered stone fragments stung his face and the bullet careened off into space, its whine high, deadly, fading into nothing.

Throwing himself prone in the half inch of wet snow that covered these rocks, he wriggled close to the rock face, yelling upward then, "Otis! You can go in with me alive or stay here dead. Make up your mind. I'm coming up."

The snow thickened until objects fifteen feet away were dim and unreal, blurred in outline. Reed eased to his feet, still clinging to the rock face. No answer drifted to him from above. It was as though he were entirely alone in this wilderness of swirling white, as though no other human breathed within a hundred miles.

Yet this was the most deadly game that man played. Reed eased himself along a ledge, eyes peering, straining always upward. Now he felt his way, using his sight for more important things.

Reaching a crevice, he wormed upward through it. Again the rifle cracked, but this time its report was muffled as though it were pointed the other way. "He thinks I've circled him." Reed found a loose rock, flung it hard and far, heard it rattle over the top on the other side of these rocks. Cupping his hands to conceal the source of the sound, he shouted again, "Throw your rifle down. I'm coming up."

He realized suddenly that the advantage was his, that there is a certain psychological advantage in being the hunter. It lent him boldness to replace some of the caution that had checked him thus far. Now he scrambled upward swiftly, placing hands and feet carefully. Soaked through, with water running down his neck from melting snow on his head, he chilled rapidly in the rising wind.

Abruptly, so abruptly that he was startled, he stood atop the rocks on a flat place of earth perhaps twenty feet across. Walking forward, gun in hand, he found Otis' shuffling, uncertain tracks, and nothing else. Raging, he bellowed, "Otis!" and listened intently, thinking suddenly of his horse at the foot of the rocks, of Carlie alone in the cabin.

Ah, a man could be sure, and then nature could thwart him. Shoving the gun back into its holster, he half slid, half fell down the precipitous drop. He landed on hands and knees,

unaware that the fall had loosened his gun in its holster, that it now lay on the ground beside him half-covered with snow. Stumbling to his feet he made a quick, questing half-circle before he picked up Otis' tracks. Running now, he gave no thought to traps and ambushes, for time was growing short. The tracks led unerringly back toward the cabin, but even after they entered the timber they continued to be man tracks, and Reed breathed gustily with relief, at least sure of this, that Otis had bypassed his horse in the blinding snow.

He blundered into the humpbacked shape of one of the Agency cows, and she lashed at him with her feet as she lunged away, uttering that peculiar, high-broken bellow of a cow in terror. The encounter left Reed with hands that shook, knees that were unsteady from surprise.

Otis' trail was rapidly fuzzing from the enormous flakes that filled the air. Reed forced a further effort from his body, which had not its accustomed endurance, which was letting him down now in his time of greatest need.

His mind scolded, "You fool! Why didn't you stop long enough to get your horse? Do you think you can run a full two miles in this slippery stuff?"

Still another five minutes he ran, suddenly noting the difference in Otis' tracks. Their outlines were now more sharp and clear, telling him that the man had stopped and was now perhaps no more than fifty feet beyond.

The full knowledge was in him that only a fool would charge onward from here, but he did not slacken his speed. He slid a hand to his holster, groped frantically and half-paused for only an instant, but long enough to feel the icy touch of impending disaster. Unarmed, weakened, pitted against a man stout as a grizzly who was armed with a rifle, suddenly the old rage rose in Reed, the violence of battle-lust. Almost as suddenly as this wildness hit him, his weariness was gone.

The old instinct yanked him abruptly to a stop. Stifling his gusty breathing, he listened, straining, silent. From ahead he thought he heard the ragged panting of a man. Or was it only the sighing of the wind in the pines? He inched forward, peering. Light was becoming uncertain. He had no way of

telling how much of daylight remained. He saw it then, a smear of gray against the anonymity of swirling snow.

Still not entirely sure that it was Otis, he launched himself forward. He drove ten feet in an instant, swerved as Otis turned. He saw the upward lift of the rifle, was deafened by its report, but was not hit. He struck the trader with the point of his shoulder and heard the enormous grunt as he drove the wind from the man. Down into the snow they went, rolling. Otis' thick, short arms encircled him, put their terrible pressure upon his ribs.

The rifle, driven from Otis' grasp by the force of their collision, lay unnoticed in the snow a yard from their grunting, struggling bodies. Reed kept his hands free, striking with hard-knuckled fists.

Rolling, he felt Otis pull free. He was dimly aware of Otis driving downward at him, knees first. Flexing explosively, he threw himself aside too late, and knew the awful pain of knee in groin as Otis landed, rolling and off balance.

Reed got painfully to his feet, backing, waiting for the pain to subside, for the nausea and blindness to go. Otis was up, coming toward him in a half crouch, lumbering much as a full-grown bear. There was triumph in Otis' every movement, a smile upon his lips that savored the victory he thought already his.

Reed stopped and Otis lunged. Putting everything into this, Reed leaped aside, smashing a hard fist downward on Otis' neck as the man went past.

Now Reed rallied all that remained of his waning strength. He whirled, following Otis who still moved with unchecked momentum. As Otis fell, Reed leaped, landing astride the trader, using the force of his leap to drive another blow at the man's thick neck.

Ponderously, Otis sought to roll over, but Reed would not be caught this way. He let the trader roll, but kept himself on top, pounding downward with vicious concentration all this time. Otis' face became a pulp beneath his driving fists.

All the hate Reed felt for Otis seethed in his brain. Again the vision of Meeker's half-consumed body swam before his eyes. The snow was a wall of privacy about these two, and the only sounds were those of their fury and effort. Otis'

struggles slowed. Reed seized the shaggy beard, and beat the trader's head against the rocky ground.

Suddenly he stopped. Fighting was one thing, but this was no longer a fight. It was murder. He stepped from the feebly-struggling form of Otis. The haze of rage lifted from before his eyes. Abruptly the thought formed in his mind, "It happened, and I didn't kill him! I went crazy, but not crazy enough to kill!"

Otis came up on one knee; trying with stupid concentration to rise. Reed watched him, not offering to help. Soaked with sweat and snow, overheated and chilling rapidly as he stood, he gazed down at Otis with eyes that no longer held hate, but only implacable determination.

Five minutes later, he had Otis on the move, and the two plodded wearily northward toward the tiny cabin.

He herded Otis, now recovered enough to be sullen, into the cabin, shoved him roughly toward the bed, trussed his hands and feet with thongs split from a pair of bridle reins. Carlie had a fire going, and its glow gave her face warmth and softness. The warmth in her eyes came not from the fire but from pride.

Reed saw her look and did not mistake its meaning. He said roughly to Otis, "You're going to Rawlins for trial. They'll hang you. But before they do, Carlie is going to divorce you and marry me."

Otis rolled over. His lip curled and he started to speak. Reed said sharply, "Watch it! I don't have to listen to your abuse!" Otis remained silent, his eyes slitted gleams of helpless rage.

That night, Piaah crept to the door, timid and quite astonished to find no hatred here, no blame for what she had done. Facing Reed, she asked in a voice without life, nodding toward the hunched and shapeless form of Otis on the bed, "Is he dead?"

Reed shook his head. "Tied up. We're going to haul him to Rawlins. If they don't hang him for anything else, they can hang him for those three Ute kids."

"Could I talk to him?"

"Sure, go ahead." Reed went across the narrow width of the cabin. He knelt beside Carlie where she crouched before

the fire. "We can wait in Rawlins until you divorce him. Then we can go away."

But Carlie shook her head. "Only if *you* want to go away."

Otis uttered an explosive grunt from across the cabin. Reed jumped up, the sudden thought within him, "She's cut him loose, damn her!"

He threw himself away from the fire, skidded on the loose dirt floor. But there was no attack from Otis. The cabin door opened and let a gust of bitter wind and a swirl of snow into the room. Reed ran to the door, saw the gray shape of Piah fleeing into the enveloping snow. He yelled, "Come back here! What the hell's the matter with you?"

She stopped. Her voice was muted by snow and by distance, but her words were plain. "Two of the three he killed were my brothers. They would not hang him in Rawlins for killing Indians. They would let him go free."

Reed swung around and ran to the bed. Otis was dead. From his chest a knife hilt protruded. Reed shrugged helplessly and returned to the door. He yelled, "Damn it, you'll freeze!" but Piah was gone.

Carlie's voice was scarcely audible. "She's used to storms. She'll be all right." Her eyes misted with sudden tears, and she asked, "Why do people hurt one another? Why do they have to be so cruel?" Reed knew she was remembering those things about Otis that had made her marry him, regretting his violent death. He said, "It's easier on him this way. Piah did him a favor."

Warmly clad, in morning's glistening cleanness, they rode their horses east, meeting the galloping and jubilant Elliott twenty miles west of what had once been White River Indian Agency.

Observation had plainly answered all of Elliott's questions but one. The two rode eastward along the beaten path of the stolen cattle, meaning that Otis was dead, for he was not with them. Carlie's presence was enough proof that Reed had rescued her, incredible as that seemed.

Bluntly he asked his question, his eyes carefully expressionless. "Did you kill him?"

Reed shook his head.

Elliott grinned then, and his eyes grew warm. "Hell! Oh hell, boy, I'm glad of that!" Embarrassed because of his doubt, he told them the news, that General Merritt had relieved the remnants of Thornburg's command, and was now camped at the agency. His eyes twinkled as he casually mentioned the presence of a chaplain there. He spoke of the talk that the Utes would be removed entirely from Colorado and their Reservation opened to settlers.

Plans began to seethe within Reed's head. "We'll have a stage line down the White River," he told Carlie, "clear to Great Salt Lake. We'll haul window glass and cast-iron stoves and bolts of calico. There'll be a settler at every turn in the river. Wait and see."

Carlie smiled. This took the wildness out of men, planning, working, building. This put a glow into their eyes, a flush into their cheeks. But a part of the wildness remained; it always remained against a time of need. Reed would fight again, for a life worth living always needed defending.

HISTORICAL NOTE——

THE BACKGROUND of *Massacre at White River* is factual. Rousing considerable notoriety at that time was the answer of Colorado's Governor Pitkin in reply to a telegram from Silverton requesting permission for settlers to unite and drive the Indians back onto their Reservation.

Denver, October 8, 1879

A. W. Hudson, Silverton:

Indians off the Reservation, seeking to destroy your settlements by fire, are game to be hunted and destroyed like wild beasts. Send this word to the settlements. Gen. Dave Cook is at Lake City in command of State forces. Gen. Hatch rushing in regulars to San Juan.

Frederick W. Pitkin, Governor

Misquoted and misinterpreted, this message roused the ire of the public who were shocked at the tone and reacted with a certain amount of sympathy for the Utes.

The Meeker women and Mrs. Price were eventually rescued, but no Indians, not even those known to have been active in the murder and mutilation of the Agency men, or the destruction of the property there, were ever brought to justice.

Today, the former Ute Reservation, which is still populated largely in the valleys only, produces as Quentin Reed had predicted, millions of pounds of beef and grain, thousands of tons of hay. It produces other commodities as well, commodities of which Reed did not suspect the existence—oil and uranium.

The Utes are a peaceful and organized people today, still

seeking payment for those acres which were taken from them.

By no means can all blame be attached to the Indians. Promises were made to them and repeatedly broken. The honor of the White Father became a tarnished thing upon which they could not rely. Meeker, an honest, conscientious man, stood in the middle and paid with his life for the shortcomings and dishonesty of others.