

#3

HELL ON A HOLIDAY

# LASH TROW

ROE RICHMOND

INFILTRATING  
THE RENEGADE  
ARMY WAS EASY  
—GETTING OUT  
WOULD BE  
IMPOSSIBLE!



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## **NO PLACE FOR A TEXAS RANGER**

The other turned for a look, his scarred beard-stubbed face lighting in amazed recognition as he spotted Lashtrow. It was Ace Alvarez, a half-breed bandit wanted on scores of charges, ranging from grand larceny to rape to murder.

“Jesus Christ!” Alvarez cried hoarsely. “What the hell’s he doing here? He’s a goddam—” He broke off and grabbed at his holster, as Lash’s .44 rose in a swift arc and burst aflame, the muzzle light pale in the bright sunshine.

Burke Coram was reaching for his pistol, but Lashtrow swerved his barrel to cover and freeze the ex-sergeant.

“He was drawing, Burke,” said Lashtrow. “I had to . . .”

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**LASHTROW #3:**

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**HELL  
ON A  
HOLIDAY**

**Roe Richmond**

*To the Memory of RUEL COLBY,  
A Fine Friend and a Gifted Writer*

A LEISURE BOOK

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## ONE

### *Furlough Time*

Lashtrow was tired but he didn't like being told to take a vacation. He didn't like being ordered to do anything, but he could take it from a man like Captain Bill McKenna. The doctor's scales that morning had showed him down from his usual one-ninety to one-seventy, and that was too light for his six-two height. He was spare and lean enough at one-ninety. Twenty pounds off that left him positively gaunt.

"You need a rest, dammit." Cactus Bill eyed the ash on his cigar and shifted his muscular bulk behind the battered disorderly desk. "You been working too hard for too long."

Lashtrow smiled at the cigarette he was shaping. "What would I do with a rest?"

"Relax. Don't you know how to relax?"

"I'm always relaxed."

McKenna snorted through the cigar smoke, but he knew it was true. He'd never seen a more relaxed man than this tall easy-moving Ranger.

"Didn't you ever learn how to enjoy life, for chrisake?" he asked irritably. "At your age I could find enough things to do."

"Always enjoy life," Lashtrow drawled, putting a match to his cigarette and drawing with satisfaction.

McKenna snorted again and peered at him intently. That also was true, but the fact remained that Lashtrow looked haggard, worn and weary, as well he might.

The gray-green eyes were clear but sunken, the brown cheeks hollowed under prominent cheekbones, the proud nose and firm jaws standing out sharper than ever.

Lashtrow had driven himself through a series of missions that would have hospitalized most strong men. Or killed them.

"You're taking a vacation, Lash," said McKenna flatly. "A month, at least."

"Those new recruits need training, Bill."

"You're no drill master." McKenna grinned behind his cigar. "But if you really want and insist on that, why—"

"There's things I'd rather do," Lashtrow said hastily.

"Do 'em then, goddamn it," McKenna told him gruffly. "I'm putting you on off-duty status for a month. With full pay, of course. Do whatever you want. Get out of the state for a while. Try riding the rails instead of a horse. Go up to Washington and see Lloyd Seagrave. You've got a standing invitation there. Take a cruise on Henry DeWitt's yacht."

Lashtrow shook his fine bronze head. "Like to see Lloyd all right, but I can't stomach politicians. They're bad enough on the state level, without going to the top. At least Henry's out of politics for good."

"You're wasting my time, Lash," said Bill McKenna brusquely. "I don't care where you go or what you do. You're on your own. Hang up your guns, leave the sorrel in the stable, and go have some fun for yourself. Read and loaf. Gamble and get drunk. Make love to the girls. A young fellah like you ought to know what to do with a month's free time, Lash."

Lashtrow rose with effortless ease to his rangy graceful length. "All right, Bill, I won't bother you any more. But if Vito Pereda should invade Texas, I reckon I could cut my vacation short?"

“Pereda? That maniac thinks he’s Santa Ana re-born! He’s raised a rabble of an army, I hear, and is planning to cross the Rio Grande.”

“He’s crazy enough to try it,” Lashtrow said thoughtfully. “Got a lot of Americans with him now, I understand. Like Greer Gaffney, who was cashiered out of the United States Army.”

McKenna grunted and gnawed on his cigar. “Yeah, there may be trouble eventually. I’ll admit it to you, where I wouldn’t to most people. That’s why Milt Travers is down in Laredo. But you’re still going on leave, Lash, I insist on that. If trouble does break out on the border, you come back on active duty. Satisfied?”

Lashtrow smiled boyishly. “Sure, Bill, sure. I’m easy to satisfy. Just like to hear you roar once in a while.”

“Get the hell outa here!” McKenna came to his feet with a bellow. “I got work to do, goddamn it!”

“All right, Bill, I’m gone.” Lashtrow saluted, grinned pleasantly, and turned out the office door.

Bill McKenna’s eyes and features softened, as he gazed after that high broad-shouldered figure with warmth and fondness, love and respect. *If Lash only knew how I’d like to be going with him, he thought wistfully. If Lash had any idea what he means to me and the Rangers and the whole state of Texas. . . .*

As Lashtrow shaved, bathed and dressed in his barrack quarters, he found it wasn’t so hard to be leaving, since all his closest comrades were out in the field. Milton Travers III, the blacksheep Boston brahmin, was in Laredo, which figured to be the focal point of the rumored Mexican invasion. Fox Edley and Rusty Bouchard were together somewhere, and Rammel was off on a separate assignment. With those four absent, the barrack was an empty place to Lashtrow.

Despite his teasing of Captain McKenna, Lash had

already planned his holiday. He would avail himself of the long-offered hospitality of an old friend, Henry DeWitt, who owned and operated the Harbor Hotel in Matamoros, at the mouth of the Rio Grande. DeWitt had a great private library, and Lash could catch up on his reading. He also had a yacht for fishing trips in the Gulf or perhaps a pleasure cruise to New Orleans. It was most inviting, and Henry had been after Lash for years to come down and stay as long as he wished. Another thing, it was on the border of Old Mexico, where trouble was brewing. McKenna would have howled in outrage, had he known Lash had that in mind.

Lashtrow had no intention, of course, to hang up his guns and leave his sorrel horse in the Rangers stable, as the captain had suggested.

He would put the sorrel in a stock car, on the Galveston, Houston & Henderson Railroad, and take the long slow leisurely train ride down to Galveston Bay, where he could catch a Gulf coast ship for Matamoros. It would be a restful change to travel some other way than on horseback. Lashtrow would eat and drink and sleep a lot en route, thus regaining the twenty pounds he had lost on duty.

The *Gulf Queen*, anchored in Galveston Bay, was a freighter under the command of Captain Carlstrum; it also carried passengers. Lashtrow led his big golden horse aboard, and saw that he was comfortably installed in the hold with other horses. The sorrel was getting restless from prolonged inactivity, and Lash soothed him as best he could.

Immaculate in rich broadcloth and fine linen, Lashtrow looked more like a prosperous rancher, business or professional man than a two-gun Ranger on leave. He had packed his gunbelt, but wore a short-barreled

Colt in a shoulder holster under his left arm. He was barbered and groomed to perfection, and took a certain pleasure in this sense of elegant well-being, yet he felt like a masquerader without his hardworn comfortable range garb. He had restored most of the lost weight, and was beginning to feel as impatient and restive as his horse, brimming full of life and energy.

The salty tang of the Gulf air was refreshing after all the inland alkali heat and dust, and Lashtrow reveled in the change. In novels when you boarded a boat, you always met an enchanting woman, but Lash doubted it would occur on this stalwart old scow. The *Gulf Queen* was bound down the coast to Matamoros, and he pondered the threat of Vito Pereda and Greer Gaffney and their army. Most Texans refused to take them seriously, or believe they'd ever become more than a minor nuisance, but Lashtrow was not convinced of their harmlessness. He was curious about Pereda and Gaffney, and their mad dream of conquest and empire. It could end only in failure, but it might cost a lot of lives to settle the issue.

Stowing his gear in the cabin, Lash found it small but neat and clean. After watching the steamer cast off from the dock and head southward away from Galveston Island, he repaired to the little saloon and ordered beer. There were two other passengers at the bar, men with dark Latin faces but dressed in expensive American clothes. Affable and friendly, in the manner of men on shipboard, they bought Lashtrow a drink, and introduced themselves when he returned the favor.

Rivera was the tall trim handsome one, smooth as silk. Lopez was short, wide, ugly, and extremely jovial. They said they were tourists, returning from travels about the United States. Lashtrow had booked on as Lane, a cattleman from the upper Brazos. The Mexicans seemed a jolly carefree pair, yet Lash sensed a certain antagonism beneath the surface. Perhaps it

was purely racial and insignificant, but Lashtrow wondered if they were as amiable and happy-go-lucky as they seemed.

"Have you seen the beautiful lady on board, Señor Lane?" inquired Rivera in his precise unaccented English.

"No, I thought that only happened in books," Lashtrow said, laughing.

Lopez spread his thick hands in an eloquent gesture. "It is true, señor, she is a lovely thing. We saw many beauties in your great country, but none to equal this one. Unfortunately she lacks interest in men. Even the mighty Rivera failed to impress her."

Rivera smiled with modest charm. "Sad but true, *amigo*. I have always enjoyed moderate success with the women, but this one ignores me."

"Maybe she's married," Lashtrow said. "Or in love with somebody else."

"Ah, that is a typical American viewpoint," Rivera said, with slight disparagement. "But on board ship most women forget such trivial ties. Something about an ocean voyage lowers their resistance, as a general thing. But not this girl. She has the look of much heat, but is cold as ice." Lash stared out a porthole at the endless blue expanse of water.

The Mexicans fell into a frank and bawdy discussion of the opposite sex, and Lashtrow soon excused himself to take a turn around the deck.

The *Gulf Queen* often transported supplies and equipment for the Ranger headquarters at Austin, and Lashtrow was pleased to find two acquaintances among the deckhands. A pair of former cowboys, Nils Larssen was blond and stocky, Arch Loomis dark and thin. When picking up Ranger consignments, Lash had met and drunk with them in Galveston.

"Well, my two seagoing *caballeros*," Lashtrow greeted them, with a laugh. "How are you, Nils and

Arch? Thought maybe you'd jumped ship and gone back to punching cows by this time."

"Not yet, Lash, but we're about ready to do just that," Larssen declared. "We're sure fed up with life on a freighter, and that's no lie."

"We been down admiring that big sorrel of yours, Lash," said Loomis. "Sure makes a man wanta straddle leather again, just to see a horse like that. Bet he'd make a good cutting horse, too. Even big as he is."

"He can work cattle," Lashtrow admitted. "He can do most anything."

"Like you, huh, Lash?" Loomis grinned.

"A lot better than me." Lashtrow smiled back at the young sailor, and went on to explain his situation. "I'm off duty, traveling under the name of Lane, a rancher from the Brazos country."

"Lane it is," Nils Larssen agreed. "Hear tell the Rangers are recruiting a lot. Been wondering if me and Arch could make the grade there."

"Hell, yes," Lash assured them. "Always glad to get men like you. I've seen you work and drink and fight, all up to Ranger standards."

"Coupla more voyages and maybe we'll hit Austin," said Loomis.

Larssen wagged his blond head sorrowfully. "It's that Creole gal he's got in New Orleans, keeps us hogtied to this bucket. He just can't forget her, the poor dumb skullhead."

Loomis grinned without resentment. "There's a lady on board could make me forget her fast. But she ain't looking at any sailors."

"I'm hearing a lot about this female passenger."

"Wait'll you see her, Lash!" Loomis tossed his dark curls. "Them Mexes made a play, but she cut 'em dead. Think she's down looking after her horse now."

"Chance to meet her maybe," Lash said, with his

slow smile. "The sorrel might win her over, if nothing else can. See you boys later."

"Button up your coat," Arch Loomis laughed. "You're heading for a cold frost, maybe a freeze-out."

Lashtrow descended the ladder to the well-deck, where the horses were tethered amidst bales and crates of cargo. The woman had turned from her own mount to stare at the sorrel in the dimness. She was rather tall, her figure fashioned in flowing grace and full lush curves, slender yet firmly rounded and richly feminine.

The chestnut hair piled on her proud head had a coppery brilliance, even in this dusky light. Her profile was sculptured in cameo-clear lines, and she had the poise and bearing of a young queen. She seemed unaware of his presence, and Lashtrow stood watching her for an interval, his pulse quickening and his throat tightening.

Finally, reluctantly, he moved forward, and the great sorrel nickered softly in greeting. The girl turned full-face to him, and Lash saw with glad relief that her mouth was broad and full, generous and gracious, giving her features a warm human quality that saved them from cold austerity. Her eyes were a strange smoky gray under long lashes and arched brows. The purity of her face and throat made something catch hurtlingly behind his Adam's apple. Her fragrance reached him through the smell of salt water and horses and the musky dampness, tinged with tar and hemp.

"Your horse?" she murmured. "What a magnificent creature! I've always wanted a sorrel like that."

Lashtrow inclined his high tawny head. "Thank you, ma'am."

"I'm Jean Tremblay," she said, holding out her hand.

"Lane," he mumbled in surprise, taking her hand and thrilling at the touch. There was a kind of instant



mutual recognition, a sharp awareness, an electric current flowing between them. Lash had felt it before, but not often. It meant that he could have this woman if he wanted her.

"I wish I could ride him—some day," she said.

"Perhaps you can, Miss Tremblay. If you're getting off at Matamoros."

"That's my destination, Mr. Lane." She looked at him with frank interest and approval. "Something familiar about you, but I'm sure we haven't met before. Very strange, isn't it?"

"Never had the pleasure before, I regret to say." Lashtrow rubbed the horse's nose and stroked the golden neck. "But there is—something."

"You love him, don't you? But who could help it? And he loves you, of course."

Lashtrow smiled gravely. "We've been pardners a long time."

"You are well matched," Jean Tremblay said. "You seem to belong together . . . Well, I must be getting above deck. Are you—?"

Lashtrow nodded. "If you don't mind, I'll go with you."

"Thank you. There are two Mexican gentlemen aboard who have been rather annoying and persistent." She frowned with distaste. "I don't know why Latin men think they are so utterly irresistible to women."

"Yeah, I met them in the bar," Lashtrow said dryly.

"I'd like a drink," Jean Tremblay confessed. "But I won't go in that saloon. Would you—would it be all right if we had a drink in my cabin? Some friends gave me a bottle of fine brandy."

"That'd be real nice," Lashtrow drawled. "Can't think of anything better." *My God, this is better than any novel*, he thought. *Too good to be true. And I can thank the sorrel for this. I sure owe that sorrel a lot*,

*including my life many times over . . . . I must be dreaming . . . .* But the girl's presence was warm, firm and real enough beside him as they walked the deck, a briny breeze off the Gulf fresh in their faces.

Jean Tremblay's cabin, obviously the best the *Gulf Queen* afforded, was far more spacious and well-furnished than one would expect on a freighter. The brandy was excellent, and her nearness was even more stimulating. Somehow they were perfectly at ease with one another from the start. There was no need to get acquainted; by some mysterious alchemy, they *knew* each other instantly and were close and comfortable together. When, after three rounds of drinks, Jean Tremblay came into Lash's arms, her face uplifted in open desire, it seemed the most natural thing in the world, fated, ordained and inevitable.

She made a man feel strong and handsome, gallant, important and indomitable. It was like holding and kissing all the lovely women in the universe, distilled into this single essence of femininity. The initial spark had flared into a consuming flame, and they shared awe, delight and exquisite pleasures in a union of flesh and spirit that sent them soaring to coruscating heights beyond belief . . . .

There was no talk of love, except with eyes and bodies. No pleas or pledges or protestations. Jean Tremblay didn't ask what people would think, what kind of woman he thought she was, or say she had never done such a thing before, given herself at first meeting. There were no explanations, excuses or recriminations. Lashtrow had known a number of unusual women, but never one like Jean Tremblay. They agreed to meet in Matamoros, and that was all. It was tacitly understood, of course, that there would be more nights aboard ship together.

When Lashtrow finally left her, after a last nightcap of cognac, he was giddy and drained, reeling and tread-

ing on air. And surprised and disgusted to bump into Rivera and Lopez on the mist-shrouded deck.

“Congratulations,” Rivera said, with something close to jealous hatred burning in his liquid eyes. “You work fast—for a gringo.”

Lashtrow stifled his anger, resolved to let no trouble or strife mar this voyage or his vacation. “We both happen to be horse lovers, that’s all,” he said quietly.

The Mexicans laughed with lewd mockery and disbelief. Rivera said: “So it took horses to melt the ice, señor? Too bad I overlooked that possibility. There’s always some quick way to a woman’s arms.”

“You’ve got it all wrong, Rivera,” said Lashtrow coldly.

“He’s jealous, that Rivera,” confided Lopez slyly. “He can’t stand losing a woman to any other man.”

“Shut up, fool!” Rivera said harshly. “I haven’t lost yet. I never lose anything I really want. Remember that, Lane.”

Lashtrow smiled slowly. “You’re fortunate then, Rivera.” He strode indifferently onward, leaving Lopez chuckling and Rivera glaring blackly.

Back in his own cabin, Lashtrow discovered that someone had been through his luggage and belongings. Luckily there was nothing to identify him as a Texas Ranger, but he was nonetheless puzzled and perturbed. Somebody on board was suspicious of him. Perhaps Rivera and Lopez did have something on their minds beside women and whiskey.

Lashtrow was going to have trouble with those two. He had sensed it from the beginning. And it irked him to have his holiday start under the imminent threat of violent conflict. He’d have to watch the passengers and crew, and never turn his back on Rivera and Lopez.

## TWO

### *Matamoros Moonlight*

The 300-mile cruise down the western coast of the Gulf of Mexico was pleasant and peaceful, in spite of Lashtrow's forebodings, with fair weather prevailing. He spent much of his time with Jean Tremblay, and they became friends as well as lovers. Well-informed on all subjects, she was an interesting companion as well as an alluring woman.

The Mexicans resented this but something kept them from moving against Lashtrow, restricting Rivera to hateful glances and slurring undertone remarks, provoking a sort of malicious amusement in Lopez. Sometimes Lash suspected that the squat homely Lopez, for all of his joviality, was more of a menace than the tall handsome Rivera.

When not with Jean Tremblay, Lashtrow occupied himself in talking with young Arch Loomis and husky Nils Larssen, or in discussions with Captain Carlstrum, a sober thoughtful man of quiet dignity and competent authority. The seaman was more concerned with the Mexican problem than Cactus Bill McKenna had been.

"Things are really seething in Old Mexico," said Carlstrum. "Vito Pereda may be a fanatic but he has a great following across the border. And Greer Gaffney has gathered a considerable force of renegade Americans, professional soldiers and outlaw killers with military experience, along with soldiers-of-fortune from Central and South America, Cuba and Europe.

Don't expect they'll ever get far in Texas, but they can inflict a great deal of damage before they're put down. The Rio Grande is practically unguarded on our side, except for a few scattered Rangers and a skeleton Border Patrol."

"That's right, Captain," agreed Lashtrow. "The Army should be down here, but apparently Washington cannot be convinced of that. President Arthur is not very strong or militant, I guess."

"The Republicans have been in there too long, over twenty years now." Carlstrum scratched his salt-and-pepper beard. "I think the Democrats will win the next election in 1884, probably with Grover Cleveland. It's time for a change. Right now a couple of companies of cavalry could quash this Mexican uprising without firing a shot."

"Might as well wish for a whole battalion." Lashtraw sighed. "We're recruiting Rangers, but too few and too late, I'm afraid."

"Well, you do a fine job with what you have, Lash."

"Do you know anything about Rivera and Lopez, Captain?"

"No, but I don't like the looks of them."

"And Jean Tremblay?" Lashtrow felt a trace of guilt with this query.

A somber smile deepened the wrinkles in Carlstrum's weathered face. "Who can tell, Lash, about a woman as lovely and smart as that? So far as I know she's a loyal American, even though she spends a lot of time on the other side of the Rio Grande. From an old respectable and wealthy family, I understand, yet something of a mystery."

There were stops at Freeport, Matagorda Island and Corpus Christi. Lashtrow escorted Jean Tremblay ashore in each port, and they had a gay rollicking time exploring the picturesque Gulf settlements. By day

they walked the deck, exulting in the clean sea breeze and bright June sunshine. The nights were confined to her cabin, bedazzled by brandy and the beauty of satisfying their deep need for one another. It was a voyage that vastly enriched Lashtrow's store of memories, with Jean sparkling and shining like a rare emerald.

It was mid-afternoon when the *Gulf Queen* wallowed upriver and docked in the sweltering tropical heat of the harbor at Matamoros. Rivera and Lopez vanished at once. Larssen and Loomis and other sailors were sweating about the cargo booms and the hold, as Jean Tremblay and Lashtrow led their horses down the gangplank to the wharf, and mounted up there. The sorrel and Jean's bay were frisky and hard to hold down, after their long tedious trip. He saw that she handled her mount with accomplished ease.

"Dinner tonight at the hotel?" Lashtrow inquired.

"Tomorrow night," Jean promised. "I'll be too busy this evening. My aunt and her daughter keep the old family place for me, but not always to my full liking. They're too easy on the servants, who grow lazy in my absence. It takes a bit of doing to restore order."

The adobe town sprawled along the southern shore of the Rio Grande, marked by the usual open plazas and towered missions of a Mexican settlement. They rode away from the bustling warehouses of the waterfront, and parted in the main plaza, where the three-storied Harbor Hotel stood high and proud. Lash left the sorrel in the hotel stable, with a solicitous groom.

Henry DeWitt, a pudgy balding man with a smooth boyish face and winning smile, came from his office behind the lobby desk to greet and embrace Lashtrow. Henry was as impeccably tailored and polished as ever.

"It's delightful to see you again, Lash. Marvelous

to have you here at last. You're looking fine, not a day older. How was the trip?

"Much better than I expected, Henry. It's good to see you and be here."

The room at the front corner of the top floor was comfortable and lavishly fitted, and the porters had a large tub of water ready in an alcove. Opening a bottle of Napoleon brandy, DeWitt lounged in an easy chair and chattered while Lashtrow shaved, bathed and dressed in fresh clothing.

"I hope you will spend the entire month here, Lash," said DeWitt, beaming over his glass. "My library and liquor cabinet and yacht are at your disposal, and in your shipmate Jean Tremblay you have already met our loveliest young lady."

"Yeah, she's something," Lashtrow murmured, sipping the cognac. "A man couldn't ask for more than this, Henry. I've looked forward to settling down here in luxury, with your rare books, fine liquor and charming conversation . . . But don't you feel some tension and unrest here?"

DeWitt groaned and gestured, miming an actor's despair. "I might have known you wouldn't sit still and enjoy a vacation, Lash. You're ready to go to work, at once, for godsake! But I must admit there's a certain amount of turbulence beneath the surface, here and all along the border. Talk of Vito Pereda and Greer Gaffney and a Mexican army. The Mexican people are not overly fond of peace, and they still believe that Texas belongs to them."

"That's understandable," Lashtrow mused. "It did once, but they lost it. And they'll never win it back, Henry."

"No, but they'll keep trying. If they took Laredo, it would give them a stronghold on the lower Rio Grande. But they couldn't penetrate much further, as I see it."

"They wouldn't get far, but they could kill a lot of innocent people trying to."

"That's true, God forbid it. But how can they be stopped from trying?"

"I don't know," Lashtrow admitted. "But if Pereda and Gaffney were killed, the movement would probably fall apart."

"How could anyone get to them, surrounded by a thousand troops?"

Lashtrow shook his sandy head. "That's the problem, Henry."

"Well, it's not your problem at the moment," DeWitt declared. "You're off duty, on leave for a month. Enjoy it, man. They won't overrun Texas while you're on furlough. Forget it, Lash."

"I can't, Henry," said Lashtrow, with a slow rueful smile.

"I suppose not." DeWitt refilled their glasses. "But please don't let it ruin your vacation, Lash."

"I won't," Lashtrow promised. "Now tell me all about Jean Tremblay."

Henry DeWitt winced comically. "You should know more about her than I do. Women on shipboard are said to be more than usual self-revealing. But apparently Jean wasn't . . . . She comes from an old aristocratic family. Her parents are dead, but she keeps the family estate here, occupied by relatives. She travels a great deal, and was rumored to have made an unfortunate marriage which ended shortly in divorce. I know nothing of the details. Jean is something of a local mystery, much gossiped about because of her beauty and background—and the family fortune, which is thought to be dwindling." DeWitt shrugged. "You see, I cannot tell you much, Lash."

"Well, it's more than she told me." Lashtrow lifted his glass. "She's coming to dine with us tomorrow night, Henry."



“Excellent, delightful, I shall look forward to it. Now it’s time you told me about some of your recent exploits, which I’ve been reading of in the national press and certain magazines.”

Lashtrow grinned in shy embarrassment. “I seldom see the papers. You tell me about them.”

“Better yet, I’ll show them to you in one of the scrapbooks I keep, as an aging man’s hobby, you know.” DeWitt rose to go to his office.

Lashtrow sighed, in resignation. “Bring another bottle too, Henry. I’m apt to need it.” Despite his deprecations, Lash anticipated reading the articles with some pleasure. There was vanity behind his modest front.

Dinner the next evening was a festive occasion in the faded elegance of the Harbor Hotel dining room, with Henry DeWitt the perfect host, and Jean Tremblay more stunning than ever in a lowcut gown of green satin, her coppery brown head agleam in the soft candlelight. The sparkling sophisticated repartee between the girl and DeWitt made Lashtrow feel slow and dull and left-out, but Jean constantly reassured him with her smoky gray eyes and lush smiling mouth.

Both Henry and Jean had the easy grace and composure of inherited wealth and prestige.

After the coffee and brandy, Lashtrow and Jean thanked Henry warmly and excused themselves to stroll about the moonlit streets and through the noisy colorful plazas, past ancient missions in which the bells were chiming. Mournful strains of Spanish music floated on the air, and a salty tang from the Gulf mingled with the odors of spiced foods and tropical plants and flowers.

“Henry DeWitt certainly has charm and wit,” Jean murmured.

"He sure does," Lashtrow agreed. "Makes me feel like a stupid illiterate saddlebum."

Jean laughed. "You're far from that, darling. You're a doer, not a talker. A man of action rather than polished words, with a much stronger charm than that of Mr. DeWitt."

"You flatter me, baby."

"No one could do that, sweet. However high the praise, it would be an understatement of the facts."

They walked past adobe-walled *haciendas* and gardens, quaint archways and narrow mysterious passages. Fountains plumed and splashed coolly, and mocking birds fluted with liquid sweetness from the chinaberry trees.

"I believe I'm getting tired," Jean said.

"We'll get a carriage." Lashtrow beckoned to a hansom cab for hire, parked in the small plaza, and Jean directed the driver to her home before they climbed in, to embrace eagerly as soon as they were seated.

It was a great walled-in mansion of stone with turrets glimmering in the moonbeams, and they stopped before a wrought-iron gateway. "Shall I keep the cab?" Lashtrow asked, handing her out.

"Yes, the house is still in disorder and my aunt is somewhat neurotic. Otherwise I'd love to show you the old homestead, but that can be done later."

Lashtrow told the driver to wait, and followed her through the grilled door into flower-perfumed shadows, the house looming like a castle in the moonlight. Jean Tremblay suddenly leaned into his arms, pressing against him, arms clutching him tight, clear-cut face upturned. Lash held her, lowering his mouth to crush the ripe fullness of hers, and she clung to him with almost desperate strength.

"Goodnight, darling. I'll see you soon—at the hotel," she whispered breathlessly. "Take care of your-

self, sweet." She turned away then, almost running toward the grand pillared entrance of the manor, and he watched her go with mild bewilderment. Jean had seemed afraid of something, on the verge of warning him against some danger.

The hansom cab was gone when he returned to the street. "I told the goddamn idiot to wait," Lashtrow muttered, and started walking back toward the center of Matamoros. The street was absolutely empty and silent, except for the sound of his own boots on the board walk. He touched the pistol under his left armpit, and decided he'd start wearing his regular gun harness again. One .44 only, as he preferred when in town.

In the filigreed shadows of a clump of pepper trees, Lashtrow lurched forward as a heavy body landed on his back with shocking suddenness, and iron arms locked his elbows from behind. Before he could begin to struggle free, the tall dapper form of Rivera appeared in front of him, smiling with cruel menace, tugging gloves tight on his hands.

"You've got a lesson coming, señor," Rivera said, and struck him savagely in the face, left and right, again and again.

Lashtrow's head rocked and his face went numb under the smashing impacts. Lights exploded behind his eyeballs. Then the blood started, as Rivera went on ripping away at his face with both fists.

Heaving and straining, Lashtrow fought to break loose from the man on his back, but Lopez held on with gorilla strength. Rivera switched to the abdomen, driving in low blows with deliberation, and Lashtrow retched in nausea as the pain sheared through his vitals. Satisfied on that score, Rivera resumed bludgeoning at the Ranger's bleeding face, grunting with sadistic satisfaction as he swung. Lash rolled with the punches.

In a flaring burst of fury, Lashtrow wrenched wildly and broke away from the leechlike Lopez on his back,

lashing out at the surprised Rivera and knocking him flat on the plank walkway. Whirling in time, Lash stabbed a left into Lopez's ugly face, as the squat Mex charged in, but Lopez kept coming and rammed Lash-trow backward. Tripping over the fallen Rivera, Lash landed on his shoulder blades, and Lopez plunged on top of him, grinding with his knees and sledging with his hands. Rolling and thrashing desperately, Lashtrow hurled Lopez off and sprang upright, just in time to meet Rivera's rush.

Beating down the Mexican's guard, Lashtrow hammered home a solid one-two, and Rivera went down again on the back of his neck, legs high in the air. Lopez was up and coming, as Rivera's legs crashed to the slats. Lash unleashed a left and right into that dark round countenance. Jolted back, Lopez fell in a twisted sprawl over Rivera, who was up to his hands and knees now.

Lashtrow reached for his left armpit, but Rivera came lunging in low and struck him at the knees before he could draw the gun. They hit the gutter in a threshing tangle, with Rivera slugging at the Ranger's crotch. Winded, torn with agony, and arm-weary, Lashtrow knew he was nearly spent. If Lopez got up again, he was finished. Lopez was getting up and reeling groggily toward them, setting himself to kick Lashtrow's face in.

A voice penetrated the steaming firelit haze that fogged Lashtrow's brain:

"That's enough, you greaser bastards! Swing that boot and you'll get a slug in the guts! Don't you god-damn Mexes ever fight fair and even?"

For a moment no one moved. Then Rivera let go and crawled off Lashtrow, to get up shakily and stand swaying beside Lopez, both of them staring blankly at the two Americans who had come upon them, guns in hand. Lash clambered slowly to his feet, chest heav-

ing as he sobbed for breath, blood streaming down his lean face.

“You wanta do a job on them two greaser dogs, pardner?” asked the big broad man who had spoken first. “Chop ’em up if you feel like it.”

Lashtrow shook his aching head, hands flattened against the pain in his abdomen. “No thanks. I’ll take ’em,” he panted. “My own time—and way.” He stooped to retrieve his hat and brush off the dust.

“All right, you Mexes get going!” the bulky man ordered. “Move out pronto, before my trigger finger gets to itching any more.”

“We oughta shoot the sonsabitches anyway, Burke,” drawled the lanky man at his side, in cool pleasant tones.

“Reckon not, Sidney. This here *hombre* prob’ly wants ’em himself, and he sure rates first chance at the bastards.”

Lopez and Rivera were stumbling away, weaving on unsteady legs and mopping their bloody faces, and the wide-shouldered man turned to Lash: “I’m Burke Coram and this is Sid Servoss. Sorry we didn’t get here a mite earlier. Can you walk, mister? Are you all right?”

Lashtrow held out a raw-knuckled hand. “Much obliged, boys. The name is Lane. I’m okay, I can walk.”

“We’re going back into town, Lane,” said Burke Coram. “We’ll string along with you, in case them greasers try to bushwhack you. What was that all about anyway?”

“A girl, I guess, more or less. They took me by surprise. I never figured Mexes to be so tough bare-handed.”

“Yeah, it’s a wonder they didn’t use knives,” said Sid Servoss. “That’s the way they usually fight, the

scum." His tone was mild and flat, but there was contempt in the way he spat aside.

"Take it easy, Lane," said Burke Coram, as they started walking toward the central plaza. "No hurry at all. It's a nice moonlight night to be out in."

"It was a nice night," Lashtrow said wryly, grinning with gashed swollen lips. His face felt starched and sore, his head still ringing.

When they came to a horse trough, Lash washed the blood off his face and hands, and ducked his throbbing head into the cool soothing water.

It turned out that Coram and Servoss were staying at the Harbor Hotel, and on parting in the lobby they agreed to meet for drinks and lunch tomorrow at high noon. DeWill looked at Lash's face, and shook his regal head.

Henry had hot water brought up to fill the tub in Lashtrow's room, and Lash relaxed gratefully in the bath with DeWill sitting by smoking his meerschaum pipe and handing him drinks at regular intervals.

"Your holiday is off to a wonderful start," DeWill remarked dryly.

"Isn't it, though?" Lashtrow said, lolling in the warm sudsy water.

"You have an amazing penchant for trouble, Lash."

"I don't hunt it, Henry. It just seems to follow me around."

DeWitt shook his balding head. "At this rate, you'll really need a rest. By the time your vacation is over, you'll require hospitalization."

"It's not that bad," protested Lashtrow. "Just a couple of Mexicans to take care of sometime along the way." He squeezed a sponge over his head.

"A marvel that they didn't use knives or guns on you, Lash."

"Didn't want to kill me this time, I reckon."

“You don’t think Jean Tremblay set you up?”  
DeWitt admired his pipe.

“I don’t *think* so. But who the hell knows, Henry?”

“Well, they’ll be out to kill you the next time,”  
DeWitt predicted.

“That’s make us even then,” Lashtrow drawled.  
“Because I’ll sure as hell be wanting to kill them.”

## THREE

### *In Old Mexico*

Since Jean Tremblay did not appear at the Harbor Hotel, and Henry DeWitt was momentarily preoccupied with investment business, Lashtrow was left in the rather agreeable company of Sid Servoss and Burke Coram. His face and body were still bruised and welted, but he didn't look or feel too bad. Lash was lucky that Rivera didn't pack a real powerful punch. With Servoss and Coram he made the rounds in Matamoros, visiting all the cantinas, saloons and gambling casinos, but the two Mexicans were nowhere in sight. Lash masked his disappointment.

"Well, I'll run across them sometime—I hope," Lashtrow concluded.

Burke Coram and Sid Servoss frankly admitted they were border adventurers bent on making an easy dollar whenever possible. Lashtrow was inclined to like them, even though they professed no respect for the law and little loyalty to the United States. They were good drinking companions, and they might eventually lead him to something worthwhile.

"I'm kind of a freelance operator myself," Lash confided.

"We can use a man like you, Lane," said Burke Coram, his huge bulk slumped indolently at a saloon table, his rugged features saturnine. "We got a deal on that oughta make us plenty of money. The only



drawback is it involves us with Pereda and his god-damn Mexicans."

"We'll be working mostly with Americans though," Sid Servoss said, slender fingers toying with his glass, a faint smile on his thin refined face. "Gaffney's got a lot of Yankees down there. Interested, Lane?"

"Yeah, I am," Lashtrow said honestly. "Got nothing cooking at present. Wouldn't mind a little excitement and some quick cash. But I don't care to enlist in that Mex army."

Coram grinned. "We ain't going to. Just doing a little job for 'em."

Servoss smiled in quiet confirmation. He obviously had breeding and background that set him above the ordinary run of fortune hunters.

"That's all right then," Lashtrow said, thinking: *Hell, that's just about perfect. A better break than he'd ever expected. Too good to pass up, that's for sure.*

"We're heading west, Lane," said Coram. "The Mex army's in camp over near Monterrey. Wanta come along?"

"I sure do," Lashtrow said, with sincerity. An opportunity to be conducted straight to the headquarters of Vito Pereda and Greer Gaffney. What could be better? "But you aren't going to join up?"

Servoss's smile broadened. "No, they just want us to divert a shipment of arms and ammunition for them. It should be fairly easy. You want to get in, or are you too patriotic?"

"Hell, that Mex army won't ever amount to nothing anyway," Coram rasped. "They ain't going nowhere. But we can make 'em happy by getting 'em some weapons to play with. And make ourselves a good bundle at the same time."

"Sounds all right to me," Lashtrow said. "I'm in—if you want me."

"That's fine, Lane," drawled Servoss. "We'll be riding in the morning."

"Reckon I'll go out and say good-bye—to a friend," Lashtrow said. "See you boys later for a nightcap or two."

"Or three or four," Servoss added, with a laugh.

Lashtrow went to the stable, threw his saddle on the sorrel, and rode out in the direction of the Tremblay estate. The horse wanted to run, and once clear of traffic Lash let him go, galloping past his objective and out into open country. The sorrel needed the exercise.

"Get your workout today, Mate," said Lashtrow. "Have to leave you behind tomorrow. Too many *bandidos* in Mexico who'd recognize you even before they did me, Pard. Have to borrow one of Henry's broncs."

After a good run, Lashtrow turned back and halted before the walled castle at the edge of town. Leaving the sorrel outside, he opened the wrought-iron gate and went up the flagstone walk to the columned portico of the turreted stone mansion. Architecturally it was a hybrid monstrosity, but none the less impressive. A colored maid answered the clang of the brass knocker. Miss Tremblay had left suddenly, she said, without a word as to her destination or when she would be returning. The high oaken door closed slowly and firmly before Lashtrow's stunned face. Just like that, as final as death. Gone without a word.

Sorely hurt and puzzled, Lashtrow cantered the sorrel back toward the main plaza of Matamoros. Jean Tremblay left him completely baffled. He couldn't figure her at all. Maybe she *had* led him into that trap the other night. She'd always been elusive, unreach-able, even in their most intimate moments. There were secret depths that couldn't be fathomed.

"Well, the hell with her," he told the sorrel. "I've

got bigger things than a goddamn unpredictable woman to worry about.”

At dinner that evening Lashtrow revealed his plan to DeWitt, and Henry was dismayed and horrified. “You’re insane to go in there, Lash. For godsake, use a little common sense. You’ll be identified by some of those outlaws and shot down like a mad dog. Or worse yet, you’ll end up in Vito Pereda’s torture chamber.”

“It’s too good a chance to let pass, Henry,” argued Lashtrow. “To see the enemy camp at close hand, learn their size and strength and perhaps their strategy. To identify Pereda and that traitor Gaffney and their subordinates. To serve Texas and the United States as few men have an opportunity to.” Lash was a bit facetious, for Henry’s benefit.

“Rubbish and tommyrot!” declared DeWitt. “Don’t wave the flag at me, Lashtrow. It’s sheer insanity, certain suicide. Only a madman would even consider such a hopeless venture.”

“Then I must be a madman,” Lashtrow drawled. “Because that’s what I’m going to do.”

Henry DeWitt did not seem too surprised, when he learned of the abrupt departure of Jean Tremblay. That seemed rather odd, but Lashtrow knew that Henry’s interest in women was only peripheral, at the most.

The next morning early, the three riders left Matamoros and started westward across the sun-scorched plains of Old Mexico. Lashtrow, comfortable and at home once more in rough range clothes, the double-sheathed shell belt buckled at his waist, was riding a big rawboned blue road, borrowed from DeWitt’s stable. He hated to leave the sorrel behind, but it was an essential precaution. There was danger enough of being recognized and denounced as a Ranger, without the widely-known horse. If any of the outlaws in the enemy camp identified Lashtrow, he was a dead man.

But he intended to let his beard grow and the trail dirt accumulate as a partial disguise. The odds were long but he thought it worth the risk, even though it was an outlandishly strange way to spend a vacation.

Burke Coram and Sid Servoss were as good trail mates as they had been drinking associates, and the three men got along well together on the trek over the burning plains and wind-scoured sand hills, the desolate rocky wastes of Mexico.

General Pereda and General Gaffney were making a tour of inspection of their encampment at the base of the mountains near Monterrey. There were about a thousand men in bivouac, but many of them were unarmed, ragged and barefooted *peons*. Not much more than half of them had firearms, Gaffney estimated, and some of those carried ancient outmoded weapons. Gaffney spat in disgust as he surveyed the shabby peasants sprawled about the long rows of tattered tents and rude lean-to shanties, drinking tequila, smoking, or sleeping under sombreros.

"Christ, what a half-assed rabble of an army," Gaffney growled.

"They will fight when the time comes," Pereda said. "You will see."

Vito Pereda, in full dress uniform despite the heat, was a small strutting man with large Negroid features and black bulging eyes that blazed insanely beneath hooded lids. His bright blue tunic was adorned with tarnished gilt epaulets, medals and ribbons, large brass buttons and much gold braid. His scarlet trousers were tucked into varnished boots with oversized spurs. He walked like a pouter pigeon, toeing out.

Greer Gaffney was a hulking brawny giant of a man with a bold domineering red face and pale cold blue eyes. He was in shirt sleeves and the yellow-striped

blue trousers of the U. S. Cavalry, a forage cap pushed back on his brutal shaven skull. He had been a captain, a good field officer against the Indians, it was said, until he had been court-martialed out of the Service. He wore a gunbelt with two army Colts in open tied-down holsters. His narrow icy eyes were more terrifying, in a way, than the fiery swollen orbs of Pereda.

"It's about time Coram and Servoss got here, goddamn it," Gaffney said.

"They will come, have no fear," Pereda declared.

"That bitch better be coming with the money, too."

"She will be arriving soon."

Gaffney laughed. "If she isn't too busy laying every sonofabitch in sight."

"That is no way to speak of a beautiful lady," Pereda protested.

"She may be beautiful, but she's no goddamn lady."

Pereda grimaced at him. "Perhaps you are responsible for the way she is; *amigo*. Did you ever consider that?"

"Hell, no," Gaffney said. "She was born the way she is, for chrissake. Some women, regardless of their background, are born to be whores."

"Whores do it for money."

"Yeah, and she does it for fun," Gaffney said, with a coarse laugh.

Pereda patted his medallioned chest. "You still love her. That is what's eating away inside you, Greer."

"Love! What are you, a goddamn head doctor or something? Does a stallion love the mare he mounts, Vito? Don't gimme that frigging nonsense about love." Gaffney gestured in exasperation.

They were approaching the sector that housed the mercenaries, the fully armed professionals from all over the world, and Gaffney's craggy features lighted up. "There's our army, Vito. The godforsaken outcast

bastards that would fight their way barehanded through the bottom of hell."

"I hope so," Pereda said. "I truly hope so, Greer. But give my countrymen the guns and ammunition and they will match your soldiers and more. They have the hate in them, hate for the gringos, and that will tell in battle."

"You're a dreamer, Vito," said Gaffney mildly. "But I'll go along with that. We'll arm them with the best weapons money can buy—or we can steal. If Coram and Servoss come through."

Pereda smiled. "Let us go back and interrogate that spy from the Border Patrol. He must be ready to talk now."

"He won't talk. He's a stubborn sonofabitch. I know his kind."

"He will talk before Apache gets done with him."

Gaffney shifted his cud of tobacco and spat brownly. "You people are into that torture business, huh? You really enjoy it."

"It gets results. It is effective."

"I s'pose that's what counts," Gaffney said. "But it turns my goddamn stomach. I wonder what's keeping that bitch."

Pereda laughed. "She's in your blood like poison, *amigo*."

"Balls," said Gaffney. "I want that money she's bringing."

"We will get it, Greer. You should have more faith, *hombre*."

"Yeah, I should be as crazy as you are, Vito. That would really help us—or ruin us."

They returned to the adobe hut headquarters, with a Mexican flag flying on the roof and two obsolete cannon flanking the entrance. In the office behind makeshift desks, Pereda fussed with his fingernails while Gaffney studied maps and worked out strategies

on paper. Pereda was the inspirational recruiter, Gaffney the field commander. The breach between them was as wide as the Gulf of Mexico.

Some time later, an orderly announced the arrival of Coram and Servoss with a newcomer named Lane. They were kept waiting in the anteroom for the proper executive quarter-hour, while Pereda preened himself and Gaffney spat out his chew and lit a cigar. When they were finally admitted, Pereda rose to accept their salutes and Gaffney remained slouched in his chair, pale eyes sweeping Coram and Servoss to fix intently on Lane. All three riders were bearded, trailworn and covered with dust and dirt.

"Are you sure about this one?" demanded Pereda, pointing a stubby finger at Lashtrow. "You had no authority to recruit anyone."

"If we wasn't dead sure we wouldn't have brought him here, General," said Burke Coram, with studied patience.

Looking at the pompous little man in the ridiculous uniform, drunk with power and athirst for more, hand on sword hilt, Lashtrow had difficulty repressing laughter. Pereda was pure comic opera, but there was nothing laughable about Gaffney.

"You assume full responsibility for this man, Burke?" asked Gaffney.

"I sure do, Greer—I mean General," said Coram.

"Never mind the 'General' shit." Gaffney bit into his cigar. "We both know I was a captain and you were a sergeant. And we were both good at our jobs. Now what about that shipment?"

Coram said: "The *Gulf Queen*'s carrying it on her next voyage. Due in Galveston July twenty-third, about noontime."

"How many men you going to need, Burke?"

"A dozen or so. The crew's unarmed except for knives. Only the captain and mates have pistols, and

they don't carry 'em half the time. But there'll be Rangers around to pick up the goods, only a couple prob'ly."

"You take the men you want. A coupla more'll join you in Refugio. It should be simple enough." Gaffney yawned and stretched his mighty arms. "Three or four hundred new repeating rifles. Five hundred new Colts. And plenty ammunition for both. With that, we can start operating. The goddamn Ranger recruits'll have to drill with broomsticks and toy pistols."

"We go by rail?"

Gaffney nodded. "Take the Missouri Pacific outa Brownsville. Too far to ride the horses. Put 'em on the train. You'll have the *Gulf Queen* to come back on, men and horses both. Best and quickest way. I'll have money for you tomorrow. The big payoff when you get back with the munitions."

"Okay, Captain," said Burke Coram. "We'll go round up the crew we want."

"I'm not sure of this one yet." Pereda indicated Lashtraw again, and even Gaffney glanced at him in surprise. "I want him tested."

"How do you mean, General?" inquired Sid Servoss, with some irony.

Pereda licked his thick lips. "That spy in the guard-house. The Indian is working on him now. Let this man watch it. I'm going to watch it myself."

"Why not, Vito?" Gaffney shrugged massively. "We'll all have a look. Break the monotony. And see how strong Lane's stomach is, huh?"

They filed out after the generals, escorted by two sentries, the small Pereda and the huge Gaffney marching ahead of the other three men. Lash began to feel faintly ill, and he saw that Coram and Servoss weren't pleased with the prospect either. Servoss nodded toward Pereda, who was fairly bouncing with eagerness, and twirled a finger at his own forehead. Coram and



Lash nodded in agreement. The little Mex was a maniac.

Lash was wondering how Coram knew so much about the *Gulf Queen*. Must have had spies on board, the ones who ransacked his cabin most likely.

Walking down an aisle between tents and shacks and scattered groups of lazing or sleeping troopers of all races, Lashtrow's spine went cold and his scalp tightened, as he waited for some voice to shout: "Hey, for chrissake, that's Lashtrow the Ranger!" But no such thing occurred. He was just one more filthy unshaven volunteer among a thousand others.

They heard the screaming before they reached the adobe building with its tiny barred windows, a horrible sound on the shimmering sunlit air. Yet the soldiers they passed paid no attention. Apparently it was a routine matter in this swarming encampment. But Lash was already feeling sick to his stomach, dizzy in the July heat.

In the torture chamber a naked man lay spread-eagled on the rack, and Lash revolted at the hideous spectacle. The victim's arms and legs had been pulled out of joint, and his skin was gashed, burned and blistered in many places.

The Apache turned an impassive brute face from the wheel of the rack. "Won't talk. Won't say nothing. Better to finish and kill."

"Not yet," Vito Pereda said, his protruding black eyes aglitter. "Give it another turn, Apache. Use the knife a little more."

The Indian twisted the wheel, stretching the disjointed limbs still further, and an unearthly wail burst from the half-conscious victim. Then, in spite of the mutilations and his own gagging nausea, Lashtrow was certain he recognized the broken, dying man on the rack. Whittaker, a Border Patrol officer, from the Laredo district. A friend of Travers.

Lash looked down at the floor. On either side of him, Servoss and Coram were pallid under the suntan and trail dust. Gaffney lounged in bored indifference, but Pereda was watching with avid lustful interest, like a glutton at a bountiful feast.

The Apache was working carefully with a razor-edged knife now, his broad back directly in front of Lashtraw. The screams were tearing the hot air, and the dripping blade was over Whittaker's breast. With a deep groan, Lashtraw swayed as if fainting, and fell forward, slamming hard into the Indian's sweaty brown back, thrusting at the elbow of the arm guiding the knife. The steel blade slid in to the hilt, under that sudden impact, and the screaming choked off at once.

Lashtraw reeled backward, and Coram and Servoss caught and held him between them. Vito Pereda whirled with a snarl and reached high to slap Lash viciously across the face. Restraining himself with a tremendous effort, Lash remained sagging in the arms of Coram and Servoss. The Apache was staring down at the dead man. Gaffney's wolf eyes were on Lashtraw.

"Clumsy chicken-livered fool!" spat Pereda, set to strike again. "You want to go on that rack yourself, gringo bastard?"

"He couldn't help it, General," growled Burke Coram. "He passed out. And I ain't feeling so good myself."

"Enough, Vito, enough." Greer Gaffney caught the little man's arm and propelled him toward the door. "Time to end the goddamn thing anyway. That man had suffered enough to satisfy anybody—anybody but you."

They went outside, and Lashtraw stumbled after them, half-supported by his companions.

"What a helluva thing," Servoss drawled in disgust. "How you feeling now, Lane?"

“I’ll be all right—out in the air,” Lashtrow panted, not daring to recover too quickly.

But Burke Coram wasn’t deceived in the least. “That took nerve, Lane,” he whispered. “Wanted to do it myself, but didn’t dare to. I don’t mind good clean killing, but *that*—”

Behind Coram’s sympathetic front, there was a lint of suspicion, and Lash knew he’d have to be more careful than ever from here on.

“You served under Gaffney, Burke?” asked Lashtrow.

Burke Coram nodded. “Third Cavalry. A tough mean sonofabitch, but a helluva soldier.”

“Why’d he get busted?”

“For beating up a lieutenant, a noncom and a private.” Coram grinned. “It was rumored he was laying the colonel’s wife, too.”

## FOUR

### *Valhalla*

The small settlement near the camp, built around a large well in the shadow of the foothills, bore the grand and unlikely name of Valhalla, which Pereda had immediately adopted for his military post. All ragged adobe bricks, there were several stores and cantinas, a blacksmith shop, busy these days, a spacious compound for cattle and a corral for horses, a restaurant, hotel and a scatter of private dwellings. Lashtrow wondered how a name from Norse mythology came to be used in Mexico.

After their meeting with the high command, Lash and Coram and Servoss rode into town to corral their horses, drink at one of the saloons, and eat in the restaurant. Following the meal, Coram and Servoss returned to the encampment to select the men for the Galveston expedition, leaving Lashtrow on his own to drift around as he wished. It was a relief to be alone, but his thoughts were not pleasant.

Lash was still raging inwardly over the barbaric killing of Whittaker, who had a wife and two children in Laredo. Pereda and Gaffney had to die for that, along with countless other crimes. Lashtrow wanted to go after them at once, but it would be suicidal, of course. He could kill the evil bastards, but he wouldn't live long afterward. It might destroy the enemy threat at its roots, but Lash wasn't ready to die yet.

Scores of cookfires blossomed like orange flowers

in the night, as Lashtrow wended his way among the tents and huts, slumped to diminish his stature, hatbrim raked low over his bearded face. He was astonished and disappointed to see so many Americans at this enemy base, as well as hardfaced mercenaries from other countries. In the headquarters building, Gaffney and Pereda were evidently in conference with their staff officers. Other men were wandering about singly or in pairs or groups, and no one paid any attention to Lashtrow. He felt invisible.

Locating the campfire wherè Coram and Servoss were in discussion with seven or eight soldiers, all Americans by their looks, Lash scanned the firelit faces intently, grateful to find them all strangers who weren't likely to recognize him. His mind eased on that point, he turned back toward the village, biting off a chew of tobacco and able to savor the taste of it now. At a distance he'd spotted Tyler Capott and Monk Jeeter.

On the western perimeter of the community, two sentries leaned on their rifles in front of a small snug adobe house, its windows glowing with lamplight. His curiosity aroused by this, Lashtrow circled the back lots in the shadow of cottonwood and pepper trees, to reach the rear of that guarded outlying home. There was a woman moving around the interior, with something vaguely familiar about her shape and grace of movement. Creeping in closer, Lash got a clear look at the inmate and froze breathless in his tracks. It was Jean Tremblay—or her identical twin—the lamplight burnishing her coppery brown hair and touching her clear patrician features.

As if feeling his gaze upon her, she moved to that open back window and peered out into the darkness. It was Jean, no mistake, with a welt on one cheekbone and a sore puffed look about her wide red mouth. Lash stepped forward out of the shadows, and her strange

smoky eyes went bright with shocked amazement, fingers tapping her lips.

"For godsake, Lane!" she whispered. "Quiet, there are guards out front."

"Yeah, I saw them," Lash murmured. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"I might ask the same thing."

"You might, but it wouldn't answer my question. How the hell did you get here, Jean?"

Jean Tremblay sighed wearily. "I was brought here. I'm a prisoner."

"They told me at your house you just left suddenly and—"

"Oh, they don't know anything about it."

"Well, for chrisake, what happened?" Lashtrow was exasperated.

"It's Greer Gaffney," said Jean. "He's always wanted me. He sent some of his men after me in Matamoros. They just grabbed me out of the garden and brought me here."

Lashtrow shook his head in perplexity. "How'd you get to know Gaffney?"

"I met him up in Denver. When he was a cavalry captain. He—he went for me there, and I had to run away. He's been after me ever since."

"He's been beating you too, I see."

"No, oh no. His men roughed me up when I tried to get away."

"I don't believe that," Lashtrow said. "I don't believe any of it."

Jean flared up. "I don't care a goddamn what you believe! Get out of here, before you get shot."

"You're coming with me, Jean."

"The hell I am! I can't get away from here. Go on, beat it. Before it's too late."

"You don't *want* to get away," Lashtrow accused. "Can't you tell the truth about anything?"

"Go, damn you! Or I'll call the guards," she threatened.

Lashtrow smiled. "Call them and there'll be two dead Mexes in your yard."

"How did you get here? Why are you here? To join the Mexican army?"

"Not exactly. I came with some friends. We're going to do a little job for Gaffney and Pereda, that's all." Lash spat to the side.

"You're chewing tobacco, for godsake!" Jean was horrified.

"I always chew tobacco. When I'm not smoking—or drinking."

Jean scowled disgustedly. "Who are you really? What are you? A federal agent? A Ranger? Some kind of spy? . . . You know what they do to spies?"

Lashtrow nodded grimly. "Yeah, I saw what they do this afternoon."

"Will you please kindly get the hell out—and stay out?"

"Sure I will," Lash drawled. "You—I reckon you belong here. I won't bother you any more."

"Oh, damn you! Damn your green eyes!" Jean reached out, caught the back of his head and pulled him in close, leaning down to plant her mouth on his with firm pressure. She held it a long time, but Lash was unresponsive. He willed himself to cold indifference.

"I'm still chewing tobacco," he said, when she released him and pulled back.

Her face furious, Jean cried softly: "Go, go, go! For godsake get out of here! I'll see you—back in Matamoros. I won't be here—long."

"As far as I'm concerned," Lastrow said, "you've already been here way too long, baby. *Adios* now."

"Go to hell!"

"You're supposed to say, *Vaya con Dios*."

“Go to hell is what I’m saying. And I mean it, Mr. Lane, or whatever your name is.”

Lashtrow grinned. “You’re sure you wanta stay—with Gaffney?”

“I’m not staying *with* Gaffney. I told you, I’m a prisoner. But I know Gaffney won’t harm me. Or let anyone else hurt me in any way. So I’m safe enough here. You don’t have to rescue me.”

“That sure takes a load off my mind,” Lashtrow drawled. “Take care, baby. Pull with the punches and don’t bite in the clinches.”

“Hurry, hurry, somebody’s coming in!” Jean waved him angrily away, as he heard the front door opening, and Lashtrow faded back into the trees and moved toward the center of town. Jean Tremblay was more of a puzzle than ever, a total enigma, but if she was that closely involved with a beast like Gaffney, he decided, she wasn’t worth worrying about. So to hell with her.

In the best cantina, Burke Coram and Sid Servoss were drinking with the seven men who would accompany them to Galveston. They introduced him as Lane all around. None of the recruits recognized him, or took any particular interest in him, which was a vast relief to Lashtrow. He caught some of the names: Dillman . . . Myron . . . Kansas . . . Jethro . . . Dakota . . . It would require a little time to attach the names to the right faces. They were lean, tough characters with cold eyes, hard mouths, and the calm assurance of professional gunfighters.

“We’ll be ten outa here, with two more joining us in Refugio. Twelve good men oughta be enough to take over the *Gulf Queen* and its cargo of arms and ammunition, which was slated for the Rangers in Austin. Leave the captain and enough crew alive to run her down the coast to Matamoros, then overland in



wagons to Valhalla. Simple enough, ain't it?" Burke Coram concluded, and tossed off his drink.

"Who's meeting us in Refugio?" someone asked, and Lashtrow listened intently for the answer, hoping to hear strange names that meant nothing.

"I disremember the goddamn names," Coram said, after some thought. "But I know 'em by sight, one Mex and one white, good sharp boys. They been scouting around Galveston to get a line on how many Rangers'll be there to pick up the shipment, and so on. We might have to burn down some Rangers."

"That won't be no hardship," said the one called Jethro, and everybody laughed—including Lashtrow, with an effort.

"They never send more'n one or two Rangers on a job like that," Dillman said. "They won't be no problem."

"Unless they send that sonofabitch Lashtrow," said Dakota. "They say the bastard's bulletproof and can blow down three-four men at a time."

"That's a lotta bullshit and you know it," Kansas said. "Ain't nobody that goddamn good, and I seen mosta the best ones myself. Earp and Hickok and Hardin and Garrett."

"How about Clay Allison and Mannen Clements and Bear River Tom Smith?" said Jethro. "I seen them in action. Bat Masterson and Luke Short, too."

"You boys been around a lot, ain't you?" Burke Coram said, with mild satire. "I seen some of them big names back right down, myself."

"Well, the Rangers don't send Lashtrow on jobs like this," Sid Servoss said. "Rookies get those assignments."

"That's a great comfort to know," young Kansas jeered. "I'll be able to sleep nights now, Sidney."

"You ain't got much to say, have you, Mr. Lane?" Myron looked at Lash.

Lashtrow grinned shyly. "No, I ain't much of a talker."

"You gotta watch them quiet ones," Burke Coram said, slapping Lash's shoulder with a friendly laugh.

Lashtrow laughed with the rest, but he knew inside that Coram really meant it. Coram was suspicious of Lash, even though he liked him.

In the morning they left Valhalla, ten rough-garbed unshaven gunhung hardcases on ten fine horses, riding eastward into the red rising sun toward the Rio Grande, Matamoros, and right across the river Brownsville, Texas. Lashtrow rode at the point with Coram and Servoss, and thought how quick and easy one of the men behind them could put a bullet in his back, if they so much as guessed at his true identity.

A gunman like young Kansas would give anything to kill a man of Lashtrow's reputation.

It was not a comfortable way to travel.

## FIVE

### *Aborted Mission*

At the depot in Brownsville, the station agent, trainmen, passengers and onlookers were alarmed by the arrival of ten bearded trail-sooted gunmen buying tickets for Galveston. Although they drifted in singly or in pairs, it was evident they were one company, and Lashtraw overheard furtive whispers about the James brothers and the Dalton boys and the Hole-in-the-Wall gang.

"For chrisake behave yourselves, boys," Burke Coram said. "We got these folks scared shitless already."

Another boxcar was hooked on to accommodate their horses, and Lash was glad that DeWitt's *grullo* rather than his sorrel had to endure this long trip on the Missouri Pacific line.

As they boarded, the conductor said: "Nothing worth stealing on this train, hahaha," trying to make a joke of it, and Burke Coram rasped: "We ain't here to rob your goddamn train. We just wanta ride on it." Regarding his companions, and aware of his own disreputable appearance, Lash couldn't blame the railroad men for being worried.

Sid Servoss saved a window-seat for Lash in the passenger coach, and they settled down on the worn stained cushions. The women in the car watched in horror, as the thirsty riders uncorked whiskey bottles and lit up cigars, pipes or cigarettes. Servoss had a

newly-opened bottle, and Lashtrow took a pull at it. It was good bourbon.

Servoss had shaved on the trail, and looked more out-of-place than ever among his mates. Lashtrow longed for a shave and bath, but he needed the whiskers for a sort of mask. His beard itched, and his body itched under the sweaty dirt-crusting clothing. Unshaven and unwashed, he was always uncomfortable, and he knew Servoss felt the same way. The others were accustomed to going bearded and filthy.

"These poor women must wish they'd stayed home," Servoss remarked.

Lashtrow nodded. "Yeah, they must. I just hope the boys don't get drunk enough to talk their usual saloon lingo."

"Sergeant Coram will chew their ears off if they do. He's quite a proper gentleman under that rough exterior."

"Were you in the Service with him, Sid?"

Servoss smiled, sensitive and wry. "For a short period. I couldn't take that regimented life. Strange too, because the army was supposed to be my career. You might not think so, but I was at West Point . . . . Again for only a brief time."

"Is that so?" Lashtrow was interested. "How'd you get to the Point?"

"My father's idea," Servoss said. "He was a congressman from Ohio, and he got the appointment for me. I didn't want it, of course, but Dad's a strong man. Well, I didn't last long."

"Let's hear about it, Sid."

"I couldn't stand Beast Barracks. That's where they kept and hazed the plebes. I belted an upperclassman who was riding me too hard. Then I was reported drinking down at Craney's Hotel. Only my father's influence in Congress saved me that time. Finally I

was caught after hours with a girl on Flirtation Walk. That did it. They booted me out."

"Reckon your dad didn't like that much."

Servoss laughed. "Disowned me, kicked me out of the house, and I've been floating around ever since. Couldn't find a regular job I liked. Tried the army but I couldn't cut it, even with Sergeant Coram's help. When Burke's enlistment ran out we got together, and have been together ever since. Gambled until our luck went cold. Worked on ranches and stagecoach lines, Burke driving while I rode shotgun. Even served as peace officers once, then hired guns, and finally decided there was more money outside the law. One shady deal after another, hit a few big ones and a lot of small ones. Always got by somehow." Servoss shook his trim head. "Now we're expatriates, traitors, running guns to Mexico . . . . What about you, Lane?"

"Oh hell, I've done about everything, but nothing well enough," Lash stalled. "Don't even like to reflect on it."

They passed the bottle to and fro, as the miles clicked and clattered away on the steel rails, and the hot coach filled with tobacco smoke, whiskey fumes, and the sweat of unclean bodies and clothes.

"You know Henry DeWitt, of course," Servoss said musingly. "Stayed at his hotel in Matamoros. Henry was in the government in Washington, quite high up at one time, cabinet member or some such position, presidential advisor perhaps. My father knew him—and liked him."

"Yes, he was in President Grant's cabinet, I believe," Lashtrow said. "I visited him once in Washington. But Henry won't talk about it now. Can't get a word out of him on those days. He was big too, introduced me to everyone right up to Ulysses. The

General gave us a drink. About six ounces of whiskey in a water glass, as I recall."

"Do you think Henry holds a grudge, Lane?"

Lashtrow looked surprised. "What do you mean, Sid? Why should he?"

"Oh, I don't know." Servoss was embarrassed. "Knowing Henry so well, I thought you might know—about the circumstances."

"What circumstances? I know Henry resigned."

Servoss gestured. "Sorry, Lane. I shouldn't have brought it up. I was certain you must know . . . . But it was well hushed up and covered, I guess. I wouldn't have known, except for my father. He felt very bad about it."

Lashtrow straightened in his seat. "What the hell was it anyway? You might as well tell me now, it's gone this far."

"I hate gossip as much as I hate politicians," Servoss said.

"So do I, Sid. But I want to know what the hell you're talking about. You can't leave it hanging in the air. I've got a right to know. Let's have it straight and true." Lash's eyes were all green and fixed on his seatmate.

Sid Servoss sighed unhappily. "Henry DeWitt was allowed to resign—under pressure. They wanted to avoid publicity and scandal. Actually he was fired—for being a homosexual."

Lashtrow was neither shocked nor unduly surprised. "I know Henry has no interest in women, except as conversationalists and showpieces. But I've never seen any other indication that he was—that way. Not the slightest sign of it."

"It shouldn't matter anyway," Servoss said, with some heat. "He's a good man and he was doing a good job. Dad always said he was one of the most

brilliant and capable men in Washington. But the bastards threw him out."

"Yeah, it's a goddamn shame." Lashtrow took another drink, and passed the bottle back. "No wonder Henry won't talk about his days in the Capital."

Servoss bent his head. "I'm ashamed to be a goddamn tale-bearer."

"No need to be, Sid," Lash assured him. "I wanted to know. It won't change my feelings toward Henry a bit. I like the man."

"He's likable all right. And he's a lot wealthier than people think, I understand."

"Henry never talks about that either," Lashtrow said. "But I know he inherited a large fortune, and has built on it considerably. He's a millionaire without question."

Servoss frowned in thought. "You know, Pereda and Gaffney have a lot of heavy financial backing, a great deal of money to operate with."

"If you're thinking of Henry, no." Lash shook his head. "I can't believe Henry DeWitt would contribute to any cause against this country. No matter how bitter he may be about what happened in Washington."

The train clanked and bumped, rocked and swayed over the rough roadbed, the smoke from the locomotive streaming back past the cindered windows, the atmosphere in the coaches growing hotter and fouler by the mile.

"I think you're right, Lane," said Servoss. "It's just that nobody knows where all that money's coming from. I can't see Henry DeWitt betraying the United States." There was irony and despair in his laughter. "For that matter, I never thought I would turn out to be a traitor, even though I detested West Point and the U. S. Army."

"Well, we haven't done any great harm to America

as yet," Lashtrow said consolingly. "And maybe we never will."

"Right, Lane. I have a strange premonition about this Galveston venture. A feeling it could turn out bad. I don't know, I've just got that feeling."

Lashtrow shrugged, thinking: *It's going to turn out bad all right, Sidney, bad for your side. If nothing happens to me on the way. I just hope you don't get cut down, Sid. I won't feel good about turning my guns loose on you and Burke Coram.*

There was a thread of worry coiled in the back of Lash's mind, too. He wondered again about the two outlaws who were to meet them in Refugio. He'd been very fortunate in Valhalla. If his luck changed, the newcomers could be men who would recognize and expose him, and that might mark the end of the trail for Lashtrow.

The train stopped for an hour at Refugio, and some of the crew made immediately for restaurants or saloons. Lashtrow and Servoss were among the few who went back to the stock car to water, feed and rub down their horses. Lowering the ramp, they led the broncs down to walk them around in the railroad yard for a little air and exercise. Lash missed his sorrel, but the blue roan had proved a good replacement, and Servoss was devoted to his handsome gray gelding.

They returned the horses to the boxcar and descended the ramp, leaving it in place for the new arrivals. Thirty yards away, Burke Coram was standing by while a stumpy long-haired man unsaddled his paint horse. As Coram greeted them, the other man turned for a look, his scarred, beard-stubbed face lighting in amazed recognition as he spotted Lashtrow. It was Ace Alvarez, a half-breed bandit wanted on scores of charges, ranging from grand larceny to rape to murder.



"Jesus Christ!" Alvarez cried hoarsely. "What the hell's he doing here? He's a goddamn—" He broke off and grabbed at his holster, as Lash's right hand flicked into motion, a blur of speed.

Lashtrow was too far away to reach the man, and there was only one way to check his tongue. Lash's .44 rose in a swift arc and burst aflame, the muzzle light pale in the bright sunshine. Alvarez stiffened up and fell back against his pinto, his half-drawn gun exploding inside the sheath and raising a gout of dirt. The paint bolted, the saddle hanging askew, and Alvarez pitched headlong into the gravel, lying slack and shapeless with the dust boiling about him. It happened so fast onlookers were stunned.

Burke Coram was reaching for his pistol, but Lashtrow swerved his barrel to cover and freeze the ex-sergeant, and Servoss yelled, "Don't try it, Burke!"

"What the hell, Lane?" snarled Coram. "For Christ's sweet sake, man! What'd you do that for?"

"He was drawing, Burke," said Lashtrow. "I had to. It's an old feud, and it was him or me. We'd sworn to shoot at first sight, next time we met."

Coram gestured angrily. "Don't keep that goddamn gun on me! I ain't foolish enough to draw. But I don't like this. He was trying to tell us something, Lane. Something about you, boy."

"He was trying to tell you I was a goddamn no-good sonofabitch," Lash said easily. "And I'd say the same about him." He sheathed the Colt.

"Maybe so, maybe," Coram muttered. "Now his pardner, Tinker Hyde, is coming in a few minutes. You got a feud with him, too?"

"No, I don't know him," Lashtrow said. "Don't think I do, anyway."

The other riders were rushing to the scene, one of them leading Alvarez' paint horse, and a crowd was beginning to gather. Kansas was eyeing Lash.

"Tinker Hyde ain't going to like this at all, Lane," said Burke Coram. "You better light a shuck before Tinker or the law gets here."

"The law won't bother me. Alvarez was wanted all over Texas and the Southwest. I could prob'ly collect a few rewards on him."

"Well, Tinker Hyde'll bother you some," Coram predicted. "Beat it before he shows. I don't want no more gunplay amongst ourselves, for chrisake!" He looked at Kansas. "Don't get no ideas, boy."

"Gotta get my horse and gear, Burke," said Lash-trow.

"I'll get your horse and things, and leave them here, Lane," said Sid Servoss. "You can catch the next train and get there in time. July twenty-third is the date." He strode back toward the boxcar.

Lash-trow glanced at Coram. "You want me to follow you up, Burke? Or just get the hell out?"

Burke Coram pondered briefly, scowling and munching his tobacco. "Goddammit, I don't know. Yeah, you rejoin us in Galveston. We may need that fast gun of yours. I'll try to square it with Tinker Hyde. Just get the hell outa sight now, before Tinker comes. He'll be mad enough to fight us all. Beat it! You've screwed things up enough for one day."

"Sorry, Burke, but I couldn't help it. See you in Galveston." Waving at the others of the gang, Lash-trow weaved his way through the growing assemblage and vanished into the station. God, but that was a close one. If more of the crew had been on hand, he'd most likely be lying dead out there alongside of Ace Alvarez. *Coram himself would have shot me, if I hadn't lined my gun on him. Well, it was bound to happen eventually. I was lucky as hell to get out of that jam. Coram let me off the hook.*

Through a dingy window, Lash-trow watched his erstwhile comrades board the train, making certain that

no one was left behind to check on him. Or shoot him down. Servoss had racked the *grullo* and left his saddle and gear stacked beside the depot. Some men were lugging away the body of Alvarez, and the crowd was dispersing, after the train pulled out.

Lashtrow had no intention of rejoining the crew in Galveston. That would be stretching good fortune way too far. He was already formulating a telegraph message to Captain Bill McKenna in Austin. There would be time enough to get some Rangers down to Galveston Island to protect the *Gulf Queen*. Somebody else would have to take care of that end of the affair. The appearance and sudden death of Alvarez had cancelled him out.

Turning to the agent's office, Lashtrow took a pad and pencil to write his wire to headquarters. He smiled as he pictured Cactus Bill McKenna cussing the hell out of him, when he read the message and realized how Lash was spending his vacation. Lash's ears would do some burning.

Then Lashtrow had to contemplate what his next move should be.

He'd have to hang around Refugio for a while, to see if McKenna wired an answer. That would give him an opportunity to get a shave and bath and some fresh clothes, at least, and perhaps sleep in a hotel bed. That would be sheer luxury and pleasure, after two weeks on the trail.

If Cactus Bill couldn't transfer any Rangers to Galveston by July 23, Lashtrow would have to go on and finish the job, even though Burke Coram had decided that he should have busted Lash instead of turning him loose.

An order from Austin to that effect would be almost like a death sentence.

## SIX

### *Guns at Galveston Island*

On July 22 in the Bayview Saloon on Galveston Island, two Ranger rookies, Rammel and Jordan, were whiling away their time on this gravy assignment, waiting for the *Gulf Queen* to dock tomorrow. Then they would pick up the consignment of arms and munitions, transport it by wagon and ferry to the mainland, and load it into a freight car on the Galveston, Houston & Henderson Railway for shipment to Ranger headquarters in Austin.

It was probably as soft an assignment as they would ever draw, they figured, and the two young men had been making the most of it, enjoying boat trips in Galveston Bay, swimming off the beaches, exploring the island city and environs on the coast, patronizing the many bars and casinos.

"I'll bet we're having a better vacation than Lash-trow is," Jordan remarked.

"Hell, he won't really take a vacation," Rammel said. "He'll find something better to do and work like mad at it." Rammel, the blond cleancut Virginian, had come to know Lashtrow, as well as Milt Travers and Rusty Bouchard, on the last big trail drive up the Chisholm Trail, four years ago in 1878, when Ram had been converted from an outlaw to the Ranger cause. He came from Virginia aristocracy, and looked the part.

The Bayview was their favorite saloon for two rea-

sons: It commanded a sweeping vista of the bay, and the dark exotic Dolores was employed there. She had taken a fancy to both of them, especially Rammel.

This afternoon they had been playing poker, until the stakes rose too high for them, and now they were loafing over drinks at a quiet corner table, attended by the lovely and vivacious Dolores. Jordan was just as good-looking in his dark sober way, but the girl's great brown eyes were mainly for Rammel. Which was too bad, Ram thought, because he was a married man and Jord was single.

At the card table, two rather arrogant well-tailored Mexicans, the tall sleek Rivera and the squat homely Lopez, continued to rake in most of the large pots. They too had taken an undue interest in Rammel and Jordan, it seemed, probing and querying and buying them drinks, without attaining much satisfaction. Ram and Jord carried their badges in vest pockets, as Lash-trow had taught them. Worn openly, the silver-rimmed star was just a target for snipers, in many lawless places in Texas and beyond. Jordan might have revealed more, in his youthful pride at being a Ranger, but Rammel, wiser and more sophisticated, kept the lid on firmly.

More experienced and hardened than his comrade, Rammel had learned a lot from Lashtrow and Milt Travers and Rusty Bouchard.

Dolores said: "Your eyes are so green, Ram, with a devil in them. And that cute dimple in your cheek."

"That's a scar, my sweet," Rammel said. "Acquired in a saber duel when I was a student at Heidelberg. Had to have a scar to graduate."

"Is this one never serious?" Dolores appealed to Jordan.

"Only about his drinking," Jord told her.

"Dolores, if I were single like Jord, I'd really court and woo you."

Dolores tossed her lustrous black head. "You don't look or act married to me."

"But I am, very definitely. Ask Jord."

Jordan nodded sadly. "That's right, he's married. To a beautiful golden blonde with violet eyes, named Tess. Daughter of a Ranger."

Rammel's green glance flickered a warning to Jordan.

"Are you two Rangers, then?"

"Oh no, we couldn't make it," Rammel said quickly.

"Why not? You are big and strong and young."

Rammel tapped his fair head. "Not smart enough, baby."

"You always make the jokes." Dolores sighed. "I don't know about you. Señors Rivera and Lopez have ask many questions about you, but I cannot answer them. Crazy *Americanos*, I guess."

"That's right. That tells the whole story, *cara mia*." Ram and Jord laughed merrily, raising their glasses to the girl.

Rivera and Lopez rose from the poker table, stuffing money carelessly into their pockets, and crossed to the corner where the three were chatting and laughing. The other card players glared after them with angry despondence.

"Why waste your time with these boys, Dolores?" asked Rivera. "They have no *dinero*. You'd better come with us. We could make you rich in one night, señorita."

"I don't want to be rich. I just want to be happy."

"Are you happy in this place?" Rivera wagged his shiny pomaded head.

"Sometimes."

"I could show you real happiness. Come along with me."

"No, I stay here. With my friends."

Rivera's lips curled into a sneer. "You have very poor judgment—and taste."

"Wait a minute there, you—" Jordan started up with clenched fists.

Rammel reached across and pushed him back into his chair. "Hold it, Jord. Take it easy."

"We don't have to take that crap from a Mex—"

"Shut up, Jord," said Rammel, with quiet firmness.

"You're a bright kid," Rivera said, with sarcasm.

Rammel smiled coolly. "Thanks—*por nada*."

"Come on, Rivera," said Lopez. "*Andale, amigo*."

Disregarding him, Rivera clutched Dolores' bare shoulder. Rammel knocked his hand away instantly.

"You want trouble with me, boy?" Rivera said, white teeth bared.

Rammel came erect in one lithe movement, right hand hanging near his lowslung gun. "No. Just leave her alone. And get out."

Rivera reached for his left armpit, but Lopez caught his elbow and yanked him around. "Not here, not here! Come with me, Rivera." He tried to pull the tall Mexican away.

Wrenching free, Rivera spun back toward the table, slit-eyed and snarling but no longer reaching for his pistol. "Pretty blond boys should be more careful, if they want to live long."

"You going to take that, Ram?" Jordan got up, kicking his chair back.

Rammel shrugged slightly. "Consider the source, Jord. He's just talking. He doesn't want to fight."

"Let's go, Rivera," pleaded Lopez, tugging at his partner's arm.

"I'll take care of you later." Rivera wheeled and stalked haughtily doorward, with Lopez shambling after him, arms spread and hands flapping.

They watched the Mexes leave, and resumed their seats.

"He tries to provoke you, Ram," said the girl.

Rammel grinned. "He sure does. And he will—in time."

"We oughta take the bastards right now!" Jordan gritted.

Rammel shook his blond head. "You know better, Jord. Can't afford to use our guns in a saloon brawl."

Dolores looked from one to the other. "What you mean—can't afford?"

"Against our principles, that's all." Rammel grinned pleasantly.

"I think you *are* Rangers," said Dolores.

"No such luck, baby," Rammel drawled. "Just a couple of drifters."

Dolores was unconvinced. "Do you know the *magnifico* Lashtrow?"

"Well, we've seen him."

"Is he as much man as they say?"

"More," Rammel said simply, and Jordan signaled for another round of drinks.

"To Lashtrow, the magnificent," Jordan toasted.

"We'd better go after this one, Dolores, so you can make some money. We don't buy fast enough. The boss is giving us the cold eye."

"Please don't go, Ram. I don't care about the money or the boss."

"Got to write my wife a letter," Rammel said.

"Is that true?" She glanced at Jordan.

"Yeah, he writes all the time. It's sickening. Well, let's drink up."

"You will come back tonight, Ram?" Dolores left her glass untouched as they downed their drinks.

"Probably."

"Watch out for Rivera and Lopez. They would shoot in the back."

"We will, don't worry."

"*Vaya con Dios.*" She lifted her glass then.



Rammel smiled gently at her. "Always, baby, always."

They rose, bowed, cocked their hats on and walked out, two tall straight fine-looking young men, with the girl staring sorrowfully after them.

On the board sidewalk, Rammel said: Be glad to get out of here, on a real job. Laredo's next, I guess, with Milt Travers. He's something, that Milton the Third. Laredo'll be the hot spot, if anything breaks on the border."

"Where you s'pose Lashtrow is?" asked Jordan, taking a chew and passing the plug over.

"Who knows?" Rammel sank his teeth into the tobacco. "I wish he was here. It's always better with Lash around."

"Yeah, he's some kinda man. You were lucky to get to ride with him and know him, up on the Chisholm Trail."

"You can't imagine how lucky, Jord," said Rammel.

Jordan spat an amber stream. "How do you figure them two Mexicans?"

"I don't know." Rammel frowned thoughtfully. "Got an idea they know we're Rangers, and want to take us out—for some reason. Perhaps they know that cargo of guns and ammo is coming in tomorrow. Could be working for Pereda and Gaffney."

"Yeah, I got that same feeling about the sonsa-bitches, Ram," said Jordan.

The sun was setting in a conflagration of colors in the west, a crimson ball blazing a red-gold path across the waters of the Gulf, and blue and lavender shadows were spreading in the island city of Galveston. The wind from the sea was sharp with salt, fresh and clean, and hundreds of gulls were following small craft into the harbor, darting and swooping to catch bait tossed from the boats. Soon the streetlights would come on

one after another in long processions, and already lamps were glimmering yellow from windows and twinkling distantly along the coast.

Sensing some threat as they neared the mouth of an alley, Rammel started to steer Jordan across the street, when rapid gunblasts shattered the twilight stillness and reverberated between adobe walls. Drawing and whirling swiftly, they saw Rivera come reeling backward out of that alley, turning, twisting and falling flat and motionless across the slatted walk, blood gushing from his face and chest.

Just within the passage, Lopez' fat bulk lay squirming in the ashes and rubble, his final unaimed shot screeching off a metal garbage can close beside him. Striding forward in the alley through gunsmoke and shadows came Rusty Bouchard, broad, red-whiskered and bowlegged, and Foxcroft Edley, compact and sinewy, his amber eyes shining like a cat's in the murky dimness, both with Colts swinging in hand.

"You was about to be bushwhacked, boys," Bouchard said casually. "We been trailing them two bastards. Reckon we caught 'em just in time. Didn't know you two was the intended victims."

Edley bent to ascertain that Lopez was dead, and came on after Rusty into the street. There was no doubt about Rivera. "How come you boys make friends so fast in a strange town?" chided Edley. "And with Pereda's front undercover men, of all people."

Folks were already swarming toward the spot, and Bouchard said: "Let's get the hell outa here before we have to answer a lotta fool questions. Back the way we came, Fox."

Stepping over Lopez's inert hulk, they filed through the alley and cut across backlots to emerge on another street. They found quick refuge in the nearest saloon. Bouchard got a bottle and glasses from the bar, and

one after another in long processions, and already lamps were glimmering yellow from windows and twinkling distantly along the coast.

Sensing some threat as they neared the mouth of an alley, Rammel started to steer Jordan across the street, when rapid gunblasts shattered the twilight stillness and everberated between adobe walls. Drawing and whirling swiftly, they saw Rivera come reeling backward out of that alley, turning, twisting and falling flat and motionless across the slatted walk, blood gushing from his face and chest.

Just within the passage, Lopez' fat bulk lay squirming in the ashes and rubble, his final unaimed shot screeching off a metal garbage can close beside him. Striding forward in the alley through gunsmoke and shadows came Rusty Bouchard, broad, red-whiskered and bowlegged, and Foxcroft Edley, compact and sinewy, his amber eyes shining like a cat's in the murky dimness, both with Colts swinging in hand.

"You was about to be bushwhacked, boys," Bouchard said casually. "We been trailing them two bastards. Reckon we caught 'em just in time. Didn't know you two was the intended victims."

Edley bent to ascertain that Lopez was dead, and came on after Rusty into the street. There was no doubt about Rivera. "How come you boys make friends so fast in a strange town?" chided Edley. "And with Pereda's front undercover men, of all people."

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they took a table by the back wall. Edley's yellow cat-eyes watched the entrance.

"What the hell you two doing here—besides saving our lives?" Jordan inquired.

"Cactus Bill McKenna sent us down," Bouchard said, chortling in his russet beard. "But he had no idea how bad you needed help."

"Yeah, you shot 'em right off our backs," Jordan said, with awe.

Fox Edley laughed. "All in a day's work. Think nothing of it, boys."

"But why were those bastards after us?" Rammel asked.

"Because Pereda and Gaffney got a crew of pirates coming in here to highjack the *Gulf Queen* as soon as she lands with them Ranger guns and ammunition tomorrow," Bouchard explained.

"How do you know that, Red Bush?" asked Rammel.

"Lash wired McKenna from Refugio."

Rammel grinned "Quite a vacation Lashtrow must be having."

"Yeah, old Lash ain't getting much rest," Fox Edley agreed. "Them two greasers was s'posed to wipe you boys out, so you wouldn't be around when they took over the ship tomorrow."

Rusty Bouchard guffawed heartily. "Now instead of two Rangers, they'll have four to deal with. You might say the odds've tripled in our favor."

"Doubled would be more accurate, Red Bush," drawled Rammel. "But I must admit we're kinda glad to see you guys."

The Missouri Pacific train bearing Burke Coram's insurgents, delayed by a track repairing job en route, chuffed into the mainland depot on Galveston Bay the

Tinker Hyde grumbled. "Only good Mex I ever knew was Ace Alvarez, and you let him get shot right under your frigging eyes."

"Button your lip, Hyde," said Coram coldly. "And I ain't telling you again. Keep your goddamn mouth shut, or pull out!"

Shortly after noon on July 23, the *Gulf Queen* nosed into her berth at the pier in the sunbright harbor, and four Rangers were aboard before she was tied up. The waterfront was not busy or crowded during the noon hour. Rammel explained the situation to Captain Carlstrum and his two mates, while Fox Edley broke out Winchesters and Colts and cartridges to arm the crew, and Bouchard and Jordan stood watch on the bridge.

Arch Loomis and Nils Larssen, delighted to get their hands on the new weapons, told Edley about Lash-trow's voyage with them, as they wiped down and loaded the carbines and revolvers.

"How many of the bastards coming?" Nils Larssen asked.

"We don't know," Edley said. "Prob'ly a dozen or so, maybe twenty."

"They won't even get near the ship," Arch Loomis prophesied. "We'll shoot the shit outa the sonsa-bitches!"

Fox Edley nodded gravely. "That is our intention."

The Rangers and sailors, positioned by Rusty Bouchard, were ready and waiting under cover when the ten men, carrying warbags and saddle gear, came straggling over the cobblestones toward the docks, like any passengers coming to board the steamer.

When they were about fifty yards away on the dock, Bouchard's voice rang out amplified by the bulhorn: "Hold it right there! You're covered by forty rifles. Drop your guns and raise your hands high."

The startled outlaws dropped their luggage, pulled their handguns, and got off a few hasty shots, bullets

splintering the rail and whanging off brasswork. Riflefire lashed out from the bridge and port and starboard sides of the bow, in flaming sheet after sheet, the crash and roar echoing over the bay water. The bandit group was ripped and slashed apart, men toppling left and right or fleeing wildly for cover. The Rangers and seamen kept on firing as fast as they could lever and aim, and the fallen outlaws who had continued shooting were soon stilled and unmoving on the wharf. Dense powdersmoke streaked with gun flashes roiled between the two factions, and Rammel thought he glimpsed two of the men vanishing into the street. Seven others were sprawled about on the dock like bloody rag bundles in spreading pools of crimson. Cordite stained the sunlit air.

It was all over in no time. The bodies jerked and twitched on the dock, as overwrought sailors went on pumping lead into them, and Rusty Bouchard bellowed into the bullhorn: "Cease fire! Cease fire! Stop the goddamn shooting! You can only kill them bastards once."

Captain Carlstrum lowered the spyglass he had been using, instead of a gun, and said calmly: "There were ten to start with. I think three got away somehow, but I doubt if they'll come back here. There are no survivors on the pier, I believe. What a shambles."

"Thank you, Captain. Good shooting, sailors," Rusty Bouchard said. "We've gotta try and run down them other three. See you before you ship out. In fact, we might book passage with you, after we get the munitions unloaded."

The four Rangers left the ship and walked past the riddled blood-soaked corpses, gagging and retching, spitting tobacco juice and shaking their sweaty heads. "Christ, what an unholy mess," Fox Edley said, and young Jordan turned abruptly aside to throw up into the water.

While Rammel and Jordan went after the wagons they had ordered to convey the cargo, Bouchard and Edley went on to search for the *bandidos*, who had somehow escaped that holocaust of gunfire. There was little chance of finding the culprits in a city like Galveston, and no possibility of identifying them anyway. The search was a fruitless gesture, as Red Bush and Foxcroft had anticipated. They turned back to help with the shipment of arms, debating their next move and halfway deciding to take passage on the *Gulf Queen's* run down to Matamoros.

"The action'll be down there on the Rio Grande, and Milt Travers'll sure need help in Laredo," Rusty Bouchard predicted. "Jordan can ride the train up to Austin with the guns. They can't have enough renegades left up here to rob a train. Take Ram with us, and maybe pick up Lashtrow somewhere along the way."

"Sounds okay to me," Fox Edley agreed.

The dock was now teeming with law officers and spectators, and the Rangers had to join in the grisly task of inspecting the bodies. Of the seven dead insurgents, the only one they knew was Tinker Hyde. Accosted by newspapermen, they said an official statement would have to come from Ranger headquarters. "We ain't allowed to talk to the press," Rusty said.

"Where's Lashtrow?" asked one reporter. "How come Lash isn't here?"

Bouchard chewed gravely on his tobacco. "Well, it's pretty hard, even for a *hombre* like Lashtrow, to be in ten or twenty places at the same time. Besides, Lash is s'posed to be on a leave of absence."

"A man answering Lash's description killed Ace Alvarez down in Refugio last week," another newsman said.

"Well now, that's the way to spend a vacation, ain't it?" Bouchard spat and shifted his chew. "Killing off

coyotes like Alvarez. I wonder how he missed Tinker Hyde here."

"You sure you can't identify any of the rest?"

"Sure as can be." Bouchard grinned through copious whiskers. "I know a lot of 'em, but I don't know every goddamn outlaw in the Southwest."

The news hounds turned to Fox. "How about you, Mr. Edley?"

"No comment until I confer with my press agent."

"Who's your press agent?"

Fox Edley solemnly winked a yellow eye. "Ned Buntline," he said, with a straight face. "He's about the best, ain't he?"



## SEVEN

### *Savage Interlude*

Greer Gaffney, a naked muscular giant with a shaved head, pale eyes flaring in his craggy red face, paced the bedroom floor in the adobe house at Valhalla, gulping now and then from the whiskey bottle in his huge hand. He had been like a raging madman, ever since the courier rode in with the news from Refugio and Galveston.

Sprawled in exhaustion on the couch, wantonly unclothed and shameless, Jean Tremblay watched him stride back and forth with mingled revulsion and lust, her strange gray eyes clouded in her hot flushed face. There were bruises on her glowing white curved body, marring the fine upstanding breasts and full firm buttocks and thighs. In stifling heat, the room smelled of sweat and sex, perfume and whiskey.

"Wiped out, wiped out completely," Gaffney said again. "No guns from Galveston, nothing from nowhere. I can't trust a goddamn soul to get anything done right. Smothered in a cruddy bunch of crazy greasers and misfit failures. What a christly fool I was to get tied up with this half-assed army of degenerate morons."

"You're getting some arms from Cuba," said Jean, dully.

"Maybe, maybe, who knows? Somebody'll probably muck that up, too, for chrisake!" He threw a violent punch at the dust-moted air.

“That man named Lane was a Ranger. I shoulda known it, when he fell against the Apache and drove that knife into the prisoner. Coram and Servoss shoulda known it, when they brought the bastard here. It musta been Lashtrow himself, and we had the son-ofabitch right here in camp.” Gaffney groaned. “And we let him go!”

“You aren’t much smarter than the rest,” Jean said indifferently.

“Don’t call me dumb, you slut!” snarled Gaffney. “I’ll break your back.”

“You’ve done that already.” The girl moaned and reached for a robe.

“Don’t put that on,” he commanded. “I’m not finished with you yet.”

Jean shook her tousled brown head. “My God, haven’t you had enough?”

Gaffney laughed drunkenly. “There ain’t enough of that in the world to satisfy me, woman. I’ll show you in a few minutes.”

“I can hardly wait,” she murmured, and drank from a glass.

“If we get the guns from Cuba, we can prob’ly take Laredo,” Gaffney said, upending his bottle. “But where we going from there, for chrisake?”

“If you take Laredo, you can capture or kill Senator Muldoon,” said Jean.

“What the hell’s important about Senator Muldoon?”

“I don’t really know. But it’s important—to someone.”

Gaffney grimaced, his hawk-face grotesque. “We gotta have more money, Jeanie.”

“There’s a limit to what I can raise—for a losing cause.”

“Hell, you can get some more, I know goddamn well. So go back there and get it.”

Jean Tremblay laughed weakly. "Just like that, hey, General?"

"If I say so, lady." Gaffney drank again, spilling liquor down his thick neck and massive sweat-shining torso. "Who is this rich bastard you're bleeding?"

"What do you care, as long as the money keeps coming?"

"I'd like to know what you do for him, that he keeps shelling out. Must be something special. But I can't figure what you give him, that you don't give me." Gaffney roared with laughter. "There's nothing else humanly possible that I know of."

Jean's smoky gray eyes filled with loathing. "I don't have to do a goddamn thing for him, Greer. That's beyond your comprehension, isn't it?"

"Who gives a goddamn? Just come here, sugar. I want some more loving."

Jean shuddered and shook her bright head, yet she knew she had no resistance against this overwhelming brute of a male. She was sickened by her own vulnerability.

"Come here, you bitch!" Gaffney gripped her wrists, yanked her upright, and crushed her lissome form in his great arms. The bottle dropped and rolled away, dribbling whiskey on the floor. She sought to struggle, knowing it was hopeless, and tears coursed down her inflamed cheeks. She felt the iron harness of him rising against her, powerful enough to lift her from the floor.

"We'll do it this way." Gaffney spun her about and forced her to bend over the foot of the bed.

"I don't like it this way, Greer," she panted.

"You love it, every goddamn way there is." He grabbed her hair and forced her head down against the mattress.

"It's animal—degrading," Jean sobbed.

Gaffney laughed. "How could anything degrade you, whore of whores?"

Tremendous shaft extended, he eased in from the rear, thrusting and finally burying himself to the hilt. The woman screamed and moaned, then subsided to the enormous pistoning, the agonizing pleasure, finally rising and writhing in ecstasy to meet the stallion onslaught. Everything was lost then in a seething chaos, until the ultimate outburst flooded her full to overflowing. She collapsed face down on the bed, and Gaffney staggered away in search of another bottle.

"Great God Almighty!" he gasped. "Maybe you're no good, woman, but for one thing you're perfect." Falling back on the couch, Gaffney sucked at the newly opened bottle. "You'll be the death of me yet, Jean. I can't get enough of you."

"I've—had it—Greer," she sobbed against the sheet. "Please—no more—not now."

"Don't worry, babe. I've had it too. Weaker'n a newborn foal. Couldn't even lick Pereda now."

"O God, I want to die," Jean Tremblay moaned. "I want to die right now."

Greer Gaffney chuckled. "We'll die a thousand times together, doll, before they ever put us under the ground. We got a lot of living and loving and dying to do yet."

He stumbled over to the bed with the bottle, set it carefully on the floor, hauled Jean full length onto the mattress, turned her over and cradled her against his brawny shoulder, showing tenderness for the first time. She sighed and snuggled closer to him.

"We can still win," Gaffney said. "Get those munitions from Cuba, and you get me some more money. We'll overrun Laredo, and crucify that Senator Muldoon upside down, for whatever reason, and scare the Jesus outa the whole State of Texas."

"But we're no good, Greer, we're rotten to the core," Jean wailed softly against his hairy chest.

"So's the whole stinking world, rotten. Don't fret about that. We'll make out, we'll be okay."

"I'll go to Matamoros tomorrow and raise some more money."

Gaffney squeezed her gently. "Don't go near another man, or I'll haunt you to the grave."

"What the hell would I want of another man?" Jean laughed shakily.

"You shouldn't want anything, but who can tell about women? . . . They say three of our men got away at Galveston. I hope Coram and Servoss got out alive. That goddamn Lashtrow screwed us good up there."

"Why are so sure it was Lashtrow?"

"You got to know him on board ship. Didn't you think he was different, out of the ordinary? You got real close, I imagine, goddamn you."

"Well, there *was* something about him . . . ."

"You're damn right. And you laid him, didn't you? I know you did. But it don't matter. One thing I'm going to do for goddamn sure is kill that sonofabitch Lashtrow. Lopez and Rivera shoulda done it in Matamoros. Guess you told them not to, huh? Well, I'd rather get him myself anyway."

"It might take some doing, General."

"You think I couldn't take him? I never saw the man I couldn't beat with guns or fists either. I've licked better men than him."

"Where'd you find them?"

Gaffney twisted her neck roughly. "Shut up, bitch, or I'll stuff your mouth with something you can't swallow. I'll feed you—"

A brisk rapping sounded on the outer front door. "What the hell's this?" Gaffney grumbled. "Pereda

prob'ly wants to parade his raggedy-assed troops in this hundred-twenty heat."

He got up, pulled on his pants, and swaggered to the door. A sentry stood there, saluting stiffly. "Message from headquarters, sir. A wagon train loaded with arms and ammunition is coming in. Escorted by a hundred trained revolutionaries who want to serve under you and General Pereda."

"Thank you, soldier. That's good news. I'll be at headquarters in half an hour." Gaffney shut the door and returned to the bedroom with a gloating grin. "Did you hear that, Jeanie? Wagon train of munitions and a hundred mercenaries coming. We'll have enough to start moving, and the hell with that Galveston fiasco."

"Good," Jean murmured sleepily. "Then I won't have to go to Matamoros, after all."

"Oh yes, you will," Gaffney said. "We still need more money, and you're the baby who can get it. You're going to tap that rich bastard for some big cash. I gotta pay these troops before they start quitting on me."

"I may not be able to get any more out of him."

"You'll get it," Gaffney said. "Now I gotta get dressed, goddamn it."

"Wear your full dress uniform and medals like Vito," suggested Jean, with a giggle.

"In a pig's ass! But I will put on a clean shirt and my best pair of britches."

"At least your medals came from the government and not a pawnshop in Mexico City."

"Little men like Pereda try to impress people. Big men like me don't have to," Gaffney said. "Jesus, but I smell like a whorehouse."

"Nobody'll notice it with all that perfume Pereda wears," Jean said.

Gaffney threw her robe over her. "Cover up, for chrisake. On this trip of yours I want you to go up to

Laredo and look over the situation. See how many Rangers and Border Patrol men are stationed there. See if they're putting up any kind of defensive works. You can take the stage up from Matamoros."

"I should be commissioned, at least a colonel." Jean Tremblay laughed, a bit wildly. "I do all the work while you soldiers lie around drunk here in Valhalla."

"You like to travel, don't you?"

"Sure, in civilization where they have trains and boats and nice hotels. It's no fun bouncing around in a lousy stagecoach."

"Aw, you're tough enough to take it, babe." Gaffney buttoned a fresh bleached army shirt, and ran a hand over his shaven skull. "Get rested now, Jeanie. We might have another go at it tonight, you know."

"Oh my God!" She turned her head wonderingly on the pillow. "I ought to put you out to stud service, and make a million dollars."

"Not a bad notion." Greer Gaffney grinned and gestured farewell. "Keep it warm for me, kid."

Her smoky gray stare was incredulous. "With you around it never has time to cool off, for godsake."

## EIGHT

### *Love Blooms in Laredo*

Leaving the neat well-kept frame home of the Whitakers in Laredo, Milt Travers was depressed to the verge of morbidity. His had been the unhappy task of telling Alice Whittaker that her husband, Lieutenant Whittaker of the Border Patrol, missing for many weeks, had been killed in action in Mexico. A message from Lashtrow had confirmed the death. The young widow had been spared the details, of course. Travers told her Whit had died a hero, which was true, and there would be a state pension, which was not true. Travers figured on supplying the pension from his monthly allowance.

He still received a generous check from his family every month, and he had just left \$100 of it with Alice, explaining it was a bonus for the families of patrolmen who died in the line of duty. During Whit's long absence, Travers had made sure she got the weekly pay envelope, and added money of his own, saying it was extra pay for hazardous duty on foreign soil. He had been fond of Whit and his wife and their small son and daughter, and he shared Alice's grief and loss.

Alice was a winsome young lady with soft brown eyes and gentle kindly ways, a devoted wife and mother, and they had been a happy family, close and loving. Milt Travers wanted to ease their sorrow and suffering as much as possible, with his friendship and secret financial assistance. It was no hardship to him,



to contribute money that otherwise would have been blown on drinking, gambling and occasional fancy women.

Alice Whittaker had taken it bravely, the children were too young to really understand, but it had been a harrowing and heartbreaking scene nonetheless, and Milt Travers felt devastated and dismayed by the cold random cruelty of fate. He suddenly missed Lashtrow more than ever, and was lonely and forlorn without the company of Lash and Bouchard, Edley and Rammel.

Mounting his coyote dun, Travers rode sadly and slowly back toward the central square of Laredo, too low in spirit even to light up a smoke or take a chew. "It's a sad sorry miserable world, Bayo," he told the horse. "I feel like getting blind drunk, but I don't want to do it alone. Why should a fine young family man like Whit die before thirty, and so many solitary worthless reprobates live to be seventy or even eighty. It doesn't make sense, Coyote. Nothing in this cock-eyed screwed-up world makes much sense, when you stop to analyze it."

Milton Travers III was dressed in simple utilitarian range clothes, cleaner than most: flat-crowned hat tilted on his brown head, green checked shirt under a leather vest, gun strapped to right thigh, belt and boots of the finest leather, tan trousers of light cord. There was an inbred look of elegance about him in any kind of garb, his keen carved features lighted by clear blue eyes and a pleasant boyish mouth. The eyes and mouth were usually smiling or laughing in harmony, but not today. He was slim and easy in the saddle, lithe and graceful in every movement, a whip-lash figure of quiet assurance and natural poise.

The fountain splashed musically at the center of the plaza, with children laughing and playing about it, but Travers took no pleasure in the sight or sounds. Swing-

ing down at a hitch-rail near the Border House, he tied the *bayo coyote* and walked toward the hotel entrance. On the gallery he met the portly frock-coated Senator Muldoon, who resembled a cartoon of an Irish politician with his curly gray head, beefy big-nosed red face, bold eyes and jutting chin.

"They'll be hitting us soon, that greaser horde," Muldoon stated. "I feel it in my bones. No action from Washington. The fat swine are sound asleep up there, with their greedy snouts deep in the public trough. I been calling for the cavalry for months, but they pay no heed. It'll be on their stupid heads, when the streets of Laredo and the Rio Grande run red with blood, by the Almighty! They'll be smitten with shame then, so help me. But too late, always too late, the curse of this nation."

"I don't think it'll be that bad, Senator," said Travers.

"When they going to send us some more Rangers, at least? One Ranger here, it's a bleeding shame and disgrace. A Mexican army on the march against us, and we got one lone Ranger and a handful of the Border Patrol. Great God, son, when they going to wake up?"

"Soon, I hope," Travers said. "There'll be some more Rangers here before long. Good day, Senator." He went on into the dim lobby, with a sigh of relief.

And there she was at the desk, a straight lovely proud-headed girl in a rich gray dress with white collar, cuffs and belt, snug in the bodice, flaring full in the skirt, reminding him of the debutantes he had known in Boston, the better ones, patrician with a bit of the gamin in them, aristocrats touched with roguishness. In a melancholy and susceptible mood, Milt Travers fell in love at first sight. The girl had chestnut hair, glinting with ruddy highlights, a cameo profile leavened by smoky gray eyes and a wide full mouth, earthy

and luscious, and the splendid shape of a young goddess. To Milt, she was the most beautiful woman in the world.

Amazingly, she came directly to him, hand outstretched. "You are Ranger Milton Travers. I know a friend of yours—Lashtrow. I'm Jean Tremblay from Matamoros."

Travers carried his silver star in the customary vest pocket, but he was well known as a Ranger in Laredo, and her instant recognition was not unnatural, though surprising. "Miss Tremblay," he said, a trifle thickly. "How is Lash anyway?"

"Fine as ever, the last time I saw him. He told me to look you up, if I ever came to Laredo. Which perhaps justifies this audacity of mine."

"No justification required. I'm grateful and happy to meet you."

She looked him up and down in frank appraisal. "You are all that Lash said—and more, Mr. Travers."

"He's inclined to exaggerate the virtues of friends, while understating his own."

Jean's smile was radiant. "He is a remarkable man."

"Great," Travers amended. "A great man in every way."

"Yes, I didn't realize the Rangers had men of such high quality."

Travers smiled modestly. "Well, we have all kinds. Sort of like the French Foreign Legion, you might say." It was astonishing how meeting this girl had cheered and uplifted him. She made a man feel handsome, charming and irresistible, a marvelous trait in a woman.

"Could you spare a little time to show me the town?" Jean inquired.

"Delighted to, Miss Tremblay. I was going to have a drink first, deploring the fact that I had no one to

drink with. Perhaps you'll join me. The little bar here is quiet, almost genteel, and ladies are welcome."

"Why yes, I might have a sherry, Mr. Travers."

The hotel saloon was empty save for the barman, who greeted Travers respectfully, brought out Milt's bottle of brandy with a glass, and poured a sherry. They sat at a table by a large window, overlooking the lower levels of the community and the Rio Grande, mirroring the sunshine.

"This is very pleasant," Jean Tremblay approved.

"Not bad for a wild tough border town," Travers said. "Mind if I smoke?"

"Certainly not." She watched him light a thin cheroot, then surveyed the riverside panorama. "I don't see any fortifications."

Milt Travers laughed. "Old Senator Muldoon is about the only man in town—or maybe in Texas—who thinks there's actually going to be an invasion attempt."

"What's your own opinion?" Jean sipped her sherry.

"I think they'll try something before the summer's over. It's an obsession with Pereda, and Gaffney loves to command troops in the field. How does the Mexican government regard this project?"

Jean shrugged shapely shoulders. "A hands-off policy. They seem to ignore the whole thing. Pereda has support in high places apparently. I was visiting friends in Monterrey and saw the army camp at Valhalla. About twelve hundred men, and they're supposed to be getting some artillery."

"Over battalion strength." Travers' blue eyes widened. "Where's the money coming from?"

"Nobody knows. But there's sound financial backing somewhere."

Travers nodded somberly. "This is more serious

than I realized.” In deep thought, he puffed on the cigar.

“Odd that you should mention Senator Muldoon,” Jean broke the silence. “He’s the primary reason I came here.” She went on to answer his unspoken question. “There are three men coming to assassinate him.”

Travers looked incredulous. “Why would anyone want to kill *him*? He’s a minor public nuisance, but otherwise quite harmless.”

“He was once a major power in Washington—in the Senate. He stomped on many people and made a lot of enemies.”

Travers refilled his glass. “How do you know about this?”

“I chanced to overhear a conversation in Matamoros.”

“You’re sure they were serious? Do you know the assassins?”

“I know them—by sight.”

“Are they here in Laredo?”

“I don’t know. But the killing was set for tonight.”

Travers sighed, having envisioned a pleasant romantic afternoon and evening with this striking girl. “Well, while I’m showing you the town, we can look for the hired gunmen. I’ll stable my horse and get a buggy.”

“I’d rather ride with you, if you don’t mind waiting for me to change. I have a room here. I—I hesitate to ask this, but would you come up with me while I change clothes? If those men are around, they might—”

“I see, they know you,” Travers said. “And they might—harm you.”

Jean Tremblay shivered. “They’d kill me. They’d kill anyone. They’re utterly ruthless.”

“Why send three hired guns to shoot a defenseless old man, I wonder?”

Jean smiled at him. "Because they know Milt Travers is stationed here."

They climbed to the second floor and paused at her doorway. Milt said: "I'll wait out here."

"No, please come in. I have some brandy, and there's an alcove where I can dress, without embarrassing you. I—I'm afraid, Milton."

Inside the room, Jean locked the door and turned quickly against him, her head bent, her arms locked around him. "Oh, Milt! I wanted you the moment I saw you. I know I'm a shameless hussy, but—Forgive me, Milt. Please, Milt." She raised her face and pressed against him, breast and thighs. Travers couldn't believe this was happening, but he wasn't going to protest. It was a long time since he'd been with a woman like her.

His arms enclosed her, pulling her even closer as their mouths met in a fusion of sweet fire, and desire flared up to weld them together. They moved to the bed, disrobing as they went, dropping clothes, gunbelt, everything. He sat on the edge of the bed to pull off his half-boots, while Jean stripped the rest of the way, and then they were clasped and clinging, Milt gentle even in the fiery heat, until they were firmly, deeply coupled in delicious warmth and rapture, lost in a pinwheeling swirl of ecstasy, raw pleasure and exquisite torment.

Only afterward, in the slow hazy fall from supreme heights, did the disillusionment set in, and the realization to Milt that he had been had and used by a capricious female of vast sordid experience and consummate professional skill. But it didn't really matter. It had been well worth it, Milt Travers decided.

The thought occurred to him that she probably had seduced Lashtrow, too. Deriving some comfort and satisfaction from that, Travers smiled at the play of light and shadows on the ceiling.

They rode leisurely around town, without glimpsing the trio that Jean described for Travers. They were the three survivors from the battle in Galveston Bay, which had left seven outlaws dead on the pier where the *Gulf Queen* was docked. Burke Coram and Sid Servoss and a young tough called Kansas. He had read about that in the papers, and rejoiced that there were no Ranger casualties. He'd been rather surprised that Lash's name was not mentioned, along with Bouchard, Edley, Rammel and Jordan.

The Missouri Pacific train from Austin and San Antonio was due at 4:15 P.M., and they swung by the depot to see who got off in Laredo. Travers had hoped to welcome some Rangers, but there were none among the arrivals. Neither did the three bandits appear.

Travers and Jean drifted back toward the upper eastern reaches of the settlement and the isolated home of Senator Muldoon, an unkempt old Federal type mansion of faded red brick. Looking fresh and pristine in her smart riding habit, like a girl from the society page of the *Boston Post*, Jean Tremblay seemed worlds away from the lusty carnal woman of the hotel room. Graceful in the saddle, she had the clean proud aspect of a young queen, remote and untouchable. The change was so drastic, it left Milt Travers awed and wondering. Two shockingly different women in one superb body. How could anyone ever hope to understand the female of the species?

"You know, I could take you right to Valhalla, if you wanted to go," Jean Tremblay said.

"You could?" Travers was genuinely surprised. "How would you manage that, Jean?"

"Perhaps I have diplomatic immunity, or some such thing." Jean laughed, with lilting gaiety.

Travers shook his head. "The more I see of you,

the less I know about you." His blue gaze was alert, sweeping both sides of the streets.

"I love being a mysterious woman."

"It's all right, if you don't overplay the role." Travers was becoming a bit annoyed.

Jean sobered. "I guess that's my trouble. Overacting, or over reacting. I'm sorry, Milt, really I am."

"Nothing to be sorry about. Hell, I have no right to be critical." Reins in left hand, Travers' right hand rested near the .44 on his thigh. If they showed and recognized the girl, he'd have to be quick, quicker than ever. Travers wished now he had the extra Colt, which he didn't like to wear in town.

They passed, repassed and circled the Muldoon house as the afternoon waned and the heat lessened, but saw nothing out of the way. The sun sank behind western mountains, washing the sky with brilliant colors that thinned to pastels, and blue-gray shadows merged into lavender and purple. Scintillating stars seemed close in the clear air, and the moon took on an orange glow. The lights of Laredo spread below them to the river.

Lamplight shone behind the shades of three side windows that marked Muldoon's study on the ground floor. The Senator had installed a pool table, and when not writing his Memoirs he played rotation with his servant, Magdalene, a mammoth woman of mixed Indian and Negro blood. Travers was telling Jean of this, when he heard horsemen in back of the brick house, clop of hoofs, jingle of bridles, creak of leather, all too close.

Dismounting, Travers dropped the reins to hold the dun and said, "Stay here with the horses," but Jean Tremblay was already on the ground, a small pistol in hand, running toward the right side of the building. The front door was always locked, so Travers could only pace along the left wall past the lighted windows.



Peering around the rear corner, he saw three broncs cropping grass and three men standing on the back porch, dimly outlined by faint light from the kitchen.

Coram was broad and rugged, Servoss thin and lanky, and Kansas the cocky swaggering kid, he knew from Jean's descriptions. They seemed to be debating something, and Kansas appeared to be the only one anxious to move in for the kill. Finally Kansas entered, with Coram trailing reluctantly after him, while Servoss lounged on the porch rail smoking a cigarette.

Travers crept toward the porch, wishing that Jean would do something to attract Servoss's attention. As if responding to mental telepathy, Jean called, "Sid, Sid," and Servoss came off the rail drawing and searching the shadows, his back to Travers. Milt reached the porch with a flying leap, and chopped his gun barrel down across Servoss's head. The man's knees jacked and he slid to the boards in a slack senseless sprawl. Milt picked up Servoss's sixgun, and Jean appeared phantomlike at his side.

"Watch him," Milt Travers said, handing her the .44, and turned to the kitchen door . . . .

Inside the house, Kansas bulled into the study, ignoring the big black woman crouched at the pool table and training his .45 on Muldoon, who stood paralyzed by the far corner. "Your time's come, Senator," said Kansas. "Your old friend—" Magdalene had swiftly reversed her cue stick and hammered the loaded butt-end against the gunman's skull, knocking him flat and cold on his face. She was six feet and weighed three hundred.

Muldoon grabbed a double-barreled shotgun off its wall rack, as Burke Coram came charging into the room behind a leveled Colt. The Senator was lining the shotgun, but Magdalene, recovering from her first swipe, beat both men to the trigger. She smote Coram a terrific blow across the chest, driving him back and

down over the threshold a split second before the shotgun belched flame with a thunderous roar, the charge passing above Coram and shattering the staircase in the corridor beyond him.

Kansas should have been dead with a crushed skull, but he was half-conscious somehow and scrabbling about on the floor to relocate his target. Muldoon let go with the other barrel of the Greener, and blew Kansas nearly in half on the expensive carpet, turning it into a bloody mess.

Out in the hallway, Burke Coram was gasping for breath and floundering around when Milt Travers came in from the kitchen. Coram fired from the floor, the bullet searing past Milt's left ear, and Milt threw down and blasted away twice, the first slug tearing through Coram's shoulder, the second almost ripping his head off. The concussions echoed through the old mansion, and powdersmoke clouded the corridor and filled the study.

Milt Travers looked into the room to make sure the Senator and his servant were unhurt, and had to duck under a swishing cue stick which Magdalene had swung before recognizing the Ranger. She was still babbling apologies when Milt raced back through the kitchen to see if Jean had Servoss under control.

The instant he stepped onto the back porch he knew she had not, but he couldn't dodge the whipping gun barrel that seemed to burst his brain, and in the blinding explosion of light he never saw the plank floor rushing up against his numbed face.

His last fleeting thought was: *That goddamn woman crossed me, killed me.*

## NINE

### *Return to Mexico*

Lashtrow, mounted on his own sorrel again and accompanied by three other Rangers and two new volunteers, arrived in Laredo to find Burke Coram and Kansas dead, and Milt Travers missing. There had been an attempt on Senator Muldoon's life. The Senator had shotgunned Kansas, after Magdalene had felled him with a cue stick. Milt Travers had killed Coram, and then disappeared. When Lash learned that Jean Tremblay had been in town with Milt, he knew that Milt must have gone to Valhalla, either willingly or as a captive. *That goddamn woman's everywhere*, he thought. *Like a plague.*

After the shootout in Galveston, Fox Edley, Rusty Bouchard and Rammel had shipped out on the *Gulf Queen* to Matamoros, leaving a disgruntled Jordan behind to transport the munitions to Austin by rail. Henry DeWitt had welcomed them, along with Nils Larssen and Arch Loomis, to the Harbor Hotel as nonpaying guests. After that taste of gunpowder on the dock, the two sailors craved more action and gave notice to Captain Carlstrum. Equipped with confiscated arms from the dead outlaws, Larssen and Loomis left the freighter with the Rangers. Lashtrow, who had been awaiting reinforcement before joining Travers in Laredo, enlisted them as special aides, requesting Captain McKenna to put them on the payroll.

Thus the six riders trekked upstream along the Rio

Grande to Laredo, only to discover that Milt Travers had vanished, as if into thin air. Knowing the persuasive powers of Jean Tremblay, Lash figured that Milt might have gone voluntarily. If not, he had been abducted by the henchmen of Burke Coram and Kansas. Whichever the case, Lashtrow meant to go after him.

"Goddamned if I know why anyone would want to assassinate Muldoon," said Lashtrow. "But somebody did, and might have succeeded, if Magdalene hadn't been so handy with a poolstick. Maybe we oughta sign her up, too."

"Reckon we'll be crossing the river, Lash," said Rusty Bouchard.

"Not all of us. I figure four men to go, and two to stay here."

Fox Edley squinted amber eyes at him. "I ain't liking what you're thinking, Lash."

"Can't be helped, Foxcroft. You and Red Bush are the veterans, logical choices to command the post here. I'll take Ram and the sailors with me. They aren't so well known on the border."

"Nobody's better known than you are," Bouchard grumbled.

Lashtrow shrugged his rangy shoulders. "I went in there once and got away with it. I can do it again."

Bouchard spat brown through red whiskers. "After what happened in Refugio and Galveston? The bounty on you'll be skyhigh, Wolf."

"Well, I don't intend to ride straight into camp this trip." Lashtrow smiled his slow smile. "Have to keep under cover more. I know the layout, at least."

They were settled down in the quiet comfortable bar of the Border House for this discussion, after interviewing Senator Muldoon, Magdalene, the local lawmen and Border Patrol officers. Lash had also paid a visit to the widowed Alice Whittaker and her little

son and daughter. In that household Milt Travers enjoyed godlike stature, and Lash suspected the generous extent of Milt's assistance there. Travers was all heart.

Lashtrow had a more disturbing vision of Milt enwrapped in the expert loving embrace of Jean Tremblay, and thought: *That woman is even more corrupt and evil than Pereda and Gaffney . . . . But I fell for it myself. I can't blame Milt for succumbing to her witchcraft.*

He poured another round of drinks, and called for a new bottle. He wished he could take all these men with him, but Edley and Bouchard must remain in Laredo and stay in touch with headquarters. Lash knew Rammel was good, and he expected Arch Loomis and Nils Larssen to prove more than adequate. Men measured up fast or died early in this trade.

"Seems like you're always sidetracking us into the background," Fox Edley complained, scowling at his whiskey glass.

"Yeah, it's strictly punitive this time, Fox," said Lashtrow. "You burned down two Mexes in Galveston that I had marked for my own."

Bouchard laughed. "We hadda do it, Lash, or else Ram and Jord wouldn't be around no more."

"Rub it in, Red Bush," drawled Rammel. "I wish now we'd blasted them in the Bayview, when Jord wanted to. I was trying to protect the Ranger image, that's all."

"Don't feel bad, Ram," said Lashtrow. "I shoulda shot 'em in Matamoros, or maybe on the *Gulf Queen*."

Arch Loomis raised his dark head and thin face. "The girl they say was up here with Travers. That the same one was on board with you, Lash?"

Lashtrow nodded. "The very same. She gets around, Arch."

"She sure does. And whatta piece! Man, she's a beauty."

Nils Larssen said: "He finally got rid of that Creole in New Orleans. Caught her in bed with a big black brute, and Arch damn near got his throat razored, in the bargain."

"Aw, hell, I knew she was no good." Loomis flushed under the tan. "But she could do things I never had nobody else do. Just like in Paris."

Rammel grinned at Lashtrow. "Sounds like Dixie Belle, up in Dexter."

"No goddamn good, none of 'em," Rusty Bouchard growled. "Look like angels, and there's nothing they won't do. Nothing too low for 'em."

"You just described Jean Tremblay, Red Bush," said Lashtrow.

Fox Edley wagged his head. "I thought Milton the Third was too smart to be took in by a bitch like that."

Lashtrow smiled sadly. "Well, she fooled me—for a while, Fox. Not that I'm any great connoisseur of women. But Jean Tremblay could fool any man, if she wanted to."

"Would Milt go to Valhalla of his own free will?" Rammel inquired.

"He might," Lashtrow assented. "I did . . . He might figure he could knock off Pereda and Gaffney, and stop the war before it got started. Suicidal, of course, as I realized when I got there."

Nils Larssen scratched his straw-colored head. "Could be they killed Travers right here, dumped him in the river or something."

"I don't think so." Lashtrow drank thoughtfully. "It's likely Sid Servoss was here with Coram, and Sid wouldn't do that. I got to know him pretty well—and like him. Servoss is the son of a U.S. Senator from Ohio, went to West Point awhile, and—well, he's a gentleman outlaw, like Rammel here was."

Rammel lifted his glass, with a grin. "Thank you, sir."

"Best way I could describe him, Ram." Lash smiled at the Virginian.

Fox Edley laughed. "I was a bad *hombre* myself, till Lash reformed me. I been on them Wanted posters up in Idaho, Wyoming and Montana."

"You don't have to brag about it," Bouchard said. "Anybody could tell by looking at you, Fox."

"Well, I never hadda hide behind a beard," Edley said, his yellow eyes dancing.

Arch Loomis splashed whiskey in his glass. "I can't wait to get into Mexico. Them señoritas are redhot stuff."

"You ain't apt to have any time for them," Nils Larssen predicted sourly. "All he ever thinks of is ass. He won't make no Ranger."

"I'll live to piss on your grave, you dumb Swede," said Loomis lightly.

Bouchard fingered his russet whiskers. "You sailor boys may wish you'd never left the sea, before this fracas is over."

"Cheerful cuss, ain't he?" Fox Edley laughed gayly. "That's what I like about old Red Bush. That's why the Osages kicked him out."

The rough friendly bantering went on amidst the laughter of men who might die tomorrow or the day after, but Lashtrow was too concerned about Milt Travers to take much part in it. Milt was like the brother Lash never had, his closest friend and comrade, a veritable part of him.

Crossing the sunburnt plains in August heat, the four riders were dust-powdered and sweat-soaked in the hot damp leather, their horses frothing white and salt-rimed. Lashtrow on his sorrel, Rammel forking his brown mustang, Loomis and Larssen mounted on claybanks from Henry DeWitt's stable. It was about

140 miles to the mountains around Monterrey, part of the Sierra Madre Oriental Range, and the military post of Valhalla lay at the foot of those heights.

Staghorn cactus bloomed brilliantly, the mescal was starred with pale buttons, and Spanish bayonet wore its white blossoms bravely on the billowing brown landscape. The horsemen traversed alkali flats scattered with podded mesquite shrubs, creosote brush and prickly pear. They plodded through sandy dunes spiked with needle-spined chollas and catchclaw, tall bladed yucca and graceful fountaining clusters of ocotillo. It was a barren desert-like country, scourged by winds and sand, blasted by the pitiless sun.

They rode with hatbrims pulled low against the blinding glare, bandannas over nose and mouth, chewing tobacco to ease the choking dryness. They saw distant groups of riders now and then, but couldn't tell if they were *Rurales*, bandits or patrols from the army. There were few signs of human habitation or animal life other than snakes and lizards.

There was always the feeling of being on foreign terrain, surrounded by hostile forces, in perpetual danger of enemy attack at any instant. It was a chilling unpleasant shadow to ride and live under, day after day, and made it difficult to sleep at night.

In Sabinas Hidalgo, they learned that three young *Americanos* had passed through a few days earlier. A lovely gray-eyed girl on a bay mare, and two rather handsome men, one riding a *bayo coyote*, the other a big gray. They seemed on friendly terms, good *compaños*. So Milt Travers was alive and well and not a prisoner. It was encouraging, if somewhat puzzling. Lashtrow could see Travers and Servos getting on well together, but what on earth was Jean Tremblay up to?

In a retrospective frame of mind, Lashtrow had been going back to boyhood days on their small Laurel Leaf spread, riding and working with his father, before Dan



Lashtraw went off to war with Longstreet's Corps to die on Cemetery Ridge at Gettysburg. To Lash there would never be a man the equal of his dad, who had taught him everything a boy needed to grow up and survive in the West. And his straight proud mother with her calm blue eyes and sweet sad smile, teaching him to talk and read and write, to dress, think and act like a gentleman, to see beauty in nature and good books. The maternal grandmother, who had bestowed on him her mixture of patience and will, gentle kindness and forthright strength.

A rich heritage—without money.

But Lashtraw hadn't done much with it. What the hell was he? A Ranger gunfighter, who drank and swore, smoked and chewed tobacco, gambled and bedded down with women and lived like a wild horse. How many men had he killed, for chrissake? He didn't care to estimate. It was his job, or to save his own life, true. But what the hell kind of a job and a life was that? . . . He bit off a fresh chew, in an effort to get rid of the bitter taste in his mouth.

Well, it was too late to change now. He'd chosen his trail, or been led into it by chance, and there was nothing left but to ride it out, all the way to the end. Lashtraw wondered if this trend of thought was portentous of that ending, in the near future. It could come at any time, with the suddenness of a single gunshot.

North of Valhalla, they threaded a steep narrow mountain pass toward Monterrey, with Lashtraw riding point and Rammel lagging back as rear guard. Not yet fully hardened to the saddle, Larssen and Loomis were galled, cramped and suffering without complaint. This was high adventure after the routine of shipboard, and they had been cowboys before they became sailors. And they were proud to ride with men like Lash and Ram.

They had passed the summit and were winding down

the western slope, nearing the foothills and the city, when Rammel came down at a run and Lashtrow dropped back from his lead position to get the message.

"A platoon of uniformed riders behind us—not *Rurales*," reported Rammel. "I didn't know they had uniforms."

"Not many do. Just the officers and Pereda's favorite cavalry company. Blue tunics and scarlet breeches, Ram?" Lashtrow spat and grinned.

Rammel nodded. "Real grand opera."

"How many's a platoon, Ram?" asked Arch Loomis.

"Forty. Squad's twelve, company one-fifty." Rammel had attended Virginia Military Institute, until he had been forced to shoot two brothers from a Richmond society family, over an involvement with their sister. "We can make town well ahead of them."

"I hope to christ so," Nils Larssen said. "Forty-to-four ain't the best odds in the world."

Stepping up the pace a bit, bunched together now, they descended through the sandy rock-littered foothills, and approached the outskirts of Monterrey as the sun lowered and reddened before them, with shadows lengthening on the rusty brown earth. On the right was an abandoned adobe house, sagging into ruin with half its caved-in roof missing.

Lashtrow pulled up abruptly, left hand raised in a sign to halt, as he spotted a group of horsemen coming out of town toward them, about squad-sized and not in uniform. Squinting into the glare, Lash recognized the pair of front riders, Tyler Capott and Monk Jeeter, two of the worst unhung renegades on the border. Glancing rearward, Lash saw that the uniformed column was already in sight, stringing colorfully along the foothill trail. Lashtrow lifted his carbine from its boot.

The enemy in front was too close for the Ranger

foursome to make a run for it. A shout went up as Capott and Jeeter identified Lashtrow, and spurred their mounts into an immediate charge. Lash fired one shot at them, and wheeled his sorrel off toward the old adobe, his comrades racing after him. Their sole chance was to fort up and fight.

The wide front door was hanging crookedly open on leather hinges, and Lash ducked low to drive the sorrel through to the empty interior, pulling aside to make room as the others came piling in, one after another. Lash moved to haul the door closed, but Rammel was already there to wrench it from the dirt and slam it shut. Dust boiled in the spacious one room, that seemed overcrowded with the intrusion of four horsemen. Wrestling their mounts into the back corners, they took carbines to the narrow deep-silled windows, two on either side of the entrance. Fortunately there were no openings in the rear wall or at the ends of the structure, a rectangular shell of sunbaked mud bricks.

Their first volley emptied one saddle and checked the enemy rush, with bullets beating at the adobe wall before the outlaws scattered away beyond range, to await the arrival of the uniformed platoon. The four inside the hut lit up smokes, and Rammel drawled:

"Seems like our invasion of Mexico has come to a quick and sorry end."

"Jesus, there's a whole goddamn army of 'em out there," Arch Loomis panted, giving up his attempt to roll a cigarette and taking a chew instead, his thin boyish face a sheen of sweat and grime.

"Yeah, I been in bad holes before," Nils Larssen muttered. "But never one this christly deep." His hat, pushed back off his head, hung from its lanyard.

"It could be worse," Lashtrow said mildly. "Hell, I've been in worse myself." He couldn't recall any offhand, but it sounded good. "We've got our horses,

grub, water, ammunition, a good solid fort." He went to his saddlebags on the sorrel, returning with a bottle of whiskey. "And this added nourishment." He uncorked the bottle with his teeth, spat out the cork, and passed the bottle to Rammel. Everyone brightened a bit, as it went from hand to hand.

Lashtrow got out his fieldglasses to scan the enemy force, which had dismounted in the distance. The uniformed lieutenant seemed to be in contention with Tyler Capott and Monk Jeeter as to the chain of command. Lash grinned, knowing the Mexican would never win that debate, uniform or not. The large flamboyant Capott would take charge, with the wizened mustachioed Jeeter his exec officer.

"They're going to move in on foot," Lashtrow announced quietly. "Not much cover out there except a few boulders, hummocks, scrub trees and thin brush. They won't get in very close, if we shoot worth a damn."

"Those uniforms make beautiful targets," Rammel said. "Pick your own targets and make every shot count."

Bullets began to drum and hammer the adobe bricks, as the attackers crept within range, and a few screeched through the slitlike apertures to ricochet around inside. The four men behind the wall returned the fire with measured care, ducking and cursing at jets from near misses, exulting when they scored themselves, dirty faces sweat-varnished.

"I nailed that sonofabitch!" Arch Loomis said, hunching down to reload. "Took me three shots but I centered the last one."

Nils Larssen chuckled. "There's one bastard won't drink no more tequila. Caught him right in the god-damn neck."

Lashtrow and Rammel didn't report their hits, but

they were making them with deadly consistency. Finally Lash said:

"Hold your fire, boys. They're falling back. They won't come again till it gets dark, I reckon."

"They paid a price," Rammel said. "Five or six dead, two or three wounded, I'd say. What do you think, Lash?"

"That's about right, Ram."

Rammel smiled at the two ex-sailors. "You Navy men did all right."

"It takes a while to get back into it," Loomis said. "But I used to be hell with a long gun."

Larssen snorted. "The long gun in your pants was all you was ever much good with, kid. Pass the god-damn bottle, Ram. This makes a man thirstier than swabbing decks."

"What makes Swedes so frigging dumb? The climate or something?" Loomis laughed and snatched the bottle from his partner. "How long you figure we can hold out here, Lash?"

"Long as the ammunition and water lasts," Lash-trow said.

Rammel glanced at the half-demolished roof. "A man could get out that way, but horses couldn't. And where the hell would a man go on foot? Or even on a horse? No place to go for help in this country."

"That's about it," Lash-trow admitted, with a somber smile.

"So we just set and wait, huh?" Loomis mused sadly.

Larssen laughed at him. "Unless you wanta unlimber that long gun of yours and lead a charge outa here, Arch."

Loomis joined in the laughter. "Them señoritas'll never know what they missed, Nils."

"Yeah, that's a shame." Larssen reached out a

rope-scarred hand. "Don't hog all the whiskey, for chrisake."

Loomis glanced from Rammel to Lashtrow. "No way out."

"We'll get out," Lash said. "Don't ask me how. I don't know. But we're going to make it."

He didn't honestly believe this. It was said strictly for morale. He knew Loomis and Larssen needed reassurance. He knew they expected a miracle from him. But Lashtrow wasn't up to it. Deep down he felt this was the end of the road, and it was a miserable way to go out.

## TEN

### *Strange Alliance*

Jean Tremblay had been trying to bring Sid Servoss back to consciousness on the dark back porch when the guns began blasting inside the Muldoon mansion. She knew something had gone wrong when she heard the shotgun roar, followed by the swift sharper explosions of handguns. Servoss was coming to but still helpless, as she saw Milt Travers returning through the dim kitchen with a smoking pistol in his hand. She could not let him shoot Servoss. She still had a tender feeling for Sidney.

Rising lithely with Sid's heavy Colt in her grasp, Jean stepped to the side of the open back door. Travers emerged and she struck him on the head with the long barrel, hating to hit him but wanting to save Sid's life. Milt crumpled and pitched forward at full length to lie unstirring. Praying she hadn't hit him too hard, Jean went in through the kitchen and halted in horror at the sight of Burke Coram's body in the hallway. She heard Senator Muldoon's voice, and knew that Kansas was dead, too.

Fleeing in panic back to the porch, she found Servoss on his feet and Travers lying senseless where he had fallen. Servoss stared at her as if seeing a ghost, shaking his stunned head in disbelief.

"Quick, Sid, help me get him away!" Jean caught Travers under one arm.

"Who is he?" Servoss stooped to clutch the other

armpit. "What the hell happened?" His head was split with pain, his legs trembling weakly.

"Kansas and Coram are dead, and the Senator's probably reloading his shotgun. You still want to kill him?"

"I never wanted to kill him. Neither did Burke. Kansas was supposed to do the job. But how the hell—?"

"Tell you later, Sid," panted the girl, as together they dragged Travers' limp form down the steps and toward the horses. Straining with all their combined strength, they lifted the Ranger across Coram's saddle. "Meet me out front. Two horses there." Jean left on the run, and Servoss climbed groggily onto his gray horse, Coram's reins in his left hand, his own in his right. It all seemed like a nightmare from which he couldn't awaken. He urged the gray forward around the corner of the house, reeling dizzily in the leather, tugging on the lead reins.

Out in the street, Jean was mounted on her bay mare with Travers' coyote dun on lead. They rode slowly off into the darkness, looking back to ascertain that Travers was still hanging like a dead man over the back of Coram's horse. The situation was beyond Servoss's comprehension.

"What were you doing there if you didn't want to kill Muldoon?" demanded Jean Tremblay.

"We were well paid—we thought. Kansas was to do the shooting. He would've killed his own mother for a price . . . . What the hell were *you* doing there? And who's that man you buffaloed?"

"Trying to prevent the killing." Jean jerked her head backward. "That's Milt Travers, a Ranger."

"Which side are you on, for godsake?" Sid Servoss asked wearily.

Jean laughed without humor. "Let's keep moving."



We can talk in Nuevo Laredo, after we get across the river."

"We taking him with us?"

"I don't know—yet. Might come in handy as a hostage."

"You sure Burke's dead? It doesn't seem possible. I can't believe it."

"I saw him, Sid." The girl shuddered visibly in her saddle. "Half his head gone. I—I'm sorry, but it's true."

"That old man killed two gunfighters like Burke Coram and Kansas? It doesn't add up, Jean." Servoss shook his aching head. "If you were with this Ranger, why did you pistol whip him?"

"He was going to shoot you. I couldn't let that happen, Sid."

Sid Servoss groaned. "I give up. Nothing makes sense. I must be dead or crazy or dreaming. This figured to be the easiest job we ever did, and old Burke's dead. God Almighty!"

Jean handed over his Colt. "I've got a gun of my own, but yours was bigger. Who paid you anyway?"

"I don't know. A man we met in Corpus Christi. We were to get a thousand apiece, five hundred in advance. He really wanted Muldoon dead."

"So we left a thousand dollars back there." Jean grimaced.

"Only half of that, Kansas's half," Servoss said. "Burke had me carry his. I've got enough to retire on."

"You aren't going back to Valhalla, Sid?"

Servoss laughed bitterly. "Not very likely. Not after that Galveston deal blew up in our faces. They'd shoot me on sight. Or turn me over to the Apache."

"I won't be welcome either," Jean Tremblay said. "I couldn't get the money Gaffney wanted."

They had taken a roundabout route, skirting the

southern perimeter of town to avoid notice, and now they were nearing the bridge over the Rio Grande that linked Laredo with its smaller Mexican counterpart. There was some traffic on the bridge, and they halted under a row of cottonwoods at the riverside: Dismounting in deep shadows, they hauled Travers off the horse and laid him on the grass. With Servoss's canteen in hand, Jean knelt to bathe Milt's face and head. He revived slowly under her gentle ministrations. Servoss came back from soaking his own head in the river, and watched her in wonder. The woman was a total paradox, beyond any understanding.

They had been lovers up in Denver, before Jean Tremblay met Captain Greer Gaffney and succumbed to his brutal overpowering masculinity. She had been too much woman for Sid Servoss, and he let her go without undue reluctance, as grateful for his escape as he was for the enthralling experience with Jean. Now he observed her with awe, as she strove to restore life to the man she had chopped down minutes earlier. Incredible.

Milt Travers surfaced to consciousness with surprise and bewilderment, blinking dazedly at Jean Tremblay and the trim slender man standing behind her. Jean laughed in relief, raising Milt's throbbing head and holding the canteen to his mouth. "Thought I was a goner." Milt gulped thirstily. "Dead for sure."

"Thank God you're not!" Jean said earnestly. "I was afraid, too."

"Your friend hits pretty hard."

"He didn't do it, Milt. I did."

"*You* did? What the hell for? Thought you were with me."

Jean stroked his damp head. "I was, Milt. But I couldn't let you shoot Sid, and there was no time to explain. Sid Servoss *is* an old and dear friend, from up in Colorado. Sid, this is Milt Travers."

The two men nodded and Travers sat up carefully, fingers exploring his skull, the pain lancing from ear to ear.

"There's no fracture. Just a nice lump," Jean Tremblay said.

"That's comforting," Travers murmured dryly, his eyes on Servoss. "Don't you work for Gaffney and Pereda?"

"Not any more," Sid Servoss said, his sensitive lips wry. "Not since Galveston."

"So, you were in on that soiree?"

"Slaughter is the word for it. I'm the sole survivor—now that Burke Coram's dead."

"Coram was your friend?" Travers' expression and tone were sympathetic. "Sorry I had to bust him, but he was shooting at me. Jean didn't give me a very clear picture of the operation."

"I know, Travers," said Servoss. "The fortunes of war. Jean seems to be on both sides, and in the middle, too."

Jean Tremblay laughed nervously. "Just another mixed-up girl, I guess. I'm sorry—sorry for everything."

Milt Travers got slowly to his feet and paced about, shakily, stopping by his coyote dun and locating the secret pouch in the saddle bow. Withdrawing a silver flask, he extended it to the woman. "Care for some brandy?"

"You need it more, Milt," said Jean. "Take the first one."

Travers drank deeply and handed her the flask. After a tiny nip, she passed it to Servoss, who saluted Milt and took a good draft.

"That is very fine brandy." Servoss handed it back to Travers, who drank once more.

"You feel up to riding now, Milt?" asked Jean.

"To where?"

"Thought you might want to take a trip to Monterrey with us, and look over the enemy establishment."

"Not very healthy country for a Ranger."

"You'll be safe enough with me. Both of you," Jean declared.

"What makes you so sure, lady?"

"Because I'm known as Greer Gaffney's woman. And nobody in Mexico crosses General Gaffney." Jean's laugh was hollow. "I'm not particularly proud of it, but the fact remains."

Milt Travers glanced queryingly at Sid Servoss.

"That's true, Travers," said Servoss. "He's the big man over there. Pereda's just a dress-parade figurehead. Gaffney runs the show."

Travers considered, massaging his sore scalp. "Well, I'm interested. Not much to keep me in Laredo at the moment. Lashtrow and three or four other Rangers will be here soon. I haven't seen much action in this war yet. But I don't know—about you and Gaffney."

"I'm through with Gaffney—except to use his name for protection." Jean Tremblay said firmly. "Let's cross the river and talk it over in Nuevo Laredo, with supper and a few drinks."

"All right," Milt Travers agreed. "As long as we three are on the same side."

"I've had enough of being an expatriate," Sid Servoss said solemnly. "Started changing sides when I got to know Lashtrow. I was glad when we got blown apart in Galveston, as long as Burke and I escaped."

Milt Travers found himself believing and liking Servoss, but he was still skeptical about Jean Tremblay. He always would be, he realized.

They mounted up, took Coram's horse on lead, and headed for the bridge on the Rio Grande, glimmering in the moonbeams.

In Monterrey, Jean Tremblay with Sid Servoss and Milt Travers moved into a handsome brownstone house, at the invitation of the owners, friends of Jean who were traveling abroad. Fitted in lavish good taste, the house had a cosmopolitan library, a drawing room hung with oils and watercolors, spacious dining room, kitchen, second-floor bedrooms and baths, a well-stocked bar and a staff of colored servants. In the rear were a stable and carriage shed, a patio with garden and fountain.

Comfortably at home in such elegance, Travers and Servoss still wondered why they had come here. Neither had really wanted to, but Jean had prevailed upon them, in her inimitable manner.

Once there, however, with money and time to spare, they proceeded to enjoy themselves thoroughly. They bought new clothes, ate and drank in the best places, gambled at the gaudy casinos, investigated the plushest parlor house, attended bullfights and cockfights. From somewhat similar backgrounds, they enjoyed many common interests and one another's company, from the start. They could discuss other things than guns, horses, liquor and women, since they had both done a great deal of reading and acquired some formal education to augment that inherent from their families. The liking between them was instinctive and mutual. Servoss having lost Coram and Travers having lost Whittaker, they were lonely and ripe for friendship.

Feeling rather foolish in the disguise of a false mustache and black eyepatch, Milt Travers accompanied Jean Tremblay on a visit to Valhalla and surveyed the enemy camp. The motley army now numbered about 1,500, well over battalion strength, and they had four functional cannon, imported from South America. General Vito Pereda supervised the daily drills, while

General Green Gaffney prepared plans for marching to the Rio Grande and Laredo.

Gaffney had set a bounty of \$1,000 on Lashtrow's head, "dead or alive." Scouts brought in word that Lashtrow and three other Rangers had crossed the border and were moving toward Monterrey. A platoon of cavalry had been dispatched to kill or capture the invaders. Pereda issued orders to take them alive, if possible, so that the Apache could work on them.

Wandering about the post, Milt Travers saw a number of outlaws he knew, including Tyler Capott and Monk Jeeter, who were not in uniform but seemed loosely arranged to Gaffney's staff, men of some authority and importance. Milt knew that Capott and Jeeter were fast guns and ruthless killers, tough bastards.

Jean had gone to her adobe in Valhalla town to rendezvous with Gaffney, insisting that Travers return to Monterrey by himself.

"Why don't I hit him when he comes out here to see you?" Milt asked.

"Impossible. There are always two sentries at the house, and Greer brings extra bodyguards with him."

"I'll be all right, I can handle him." Jean spoke with more confidence than she felt. "I'll see you and Sid in a day or two."

Travers rode off into the mountains, alone with his morose thoughts, as he removed the false mustache and eyepatch, drank from his silver flask and took a chew of tobacco. Gaffney wasn't above killing a woman. He had strangled at least one whore in Denver, Milt recalled hearing about. There was another cause for worry. Lashtrow and three comrades had come into Mexico to rescue him, when there was no need for it.

"I should've left a message for Lash, at least," Travers told his horse. "I wasn't thinking very straight

after that rap on the head, goddamn it. Between that and Jean Tremblay, I was all fouled up. Christ, if they run into that cavalry platoon, what chance will four men have? Lack of communication loses lives. All my own fault, Bayo."

When two days passed without Jean Tremblay showing up in Monterrey, Travers and Servoss grew concerned.

"Strange thing," Servoss mused. "I know she's no damn good, yet I still have a feeling for her."

"So do I," Travers confessed. "And I don't understand it either. You can't trust her. She's got more sides than a jigsaw puzzle. She probably figured we'd take turns servicing her here, for chrissake."

"Sure she did. Or else we'd get jealous and fight over her. I don't know . . . I don't *want* her, but I care what happens to her, goddamn it."

They were on the street the second day, shrinking back under a wooden overhang, when Tyler Capott and Monk Jeeter rode through with ten bandoleered gun-bristling riders behind them, stringing out toward the road that ran east into the foothills and mountains.

"Jesus, they'll catch Lash and the boys in a pincer," Travers said. "That cavalry unit'll be closing in from the other side, no doubt. What the hell we going to do, Sid?"

"I don't know, Milt," said Servoss. "But we better saddle up and be ready to move out."

That evening they overheard talk in the Cantina Montezuma: The Mex army had four Texas Rangers holed up in a ruined adobe out beyond the eastern edge of town. The Rangers were penned in without a chance in hell, but they might make a long seige of it.

Travers and Servoss downed their drinks and walked out to mount and ride back to the brownstone first, just in case Jean had finally got in from Valhalla.

She had and was already bathed and changed with

a tall drink in hand, looking fresh and fine except for a bruised cheekbone and slightly puffed lips. Jean Tremblay nodded, as if she knew all about it, as they started to sketch the situation for her.

"We'll ride out there in the morning and get them to surrender. It's the only chance." Jean sounded brisk and assured, indomitable, and her companions were instantly cheered. "We'll have orders straight from General Gaffney that they're to be taken alive, no other way. It'll probably take some talking to induce Lash-trow to give up, but seeing us three there might do it. Then we'll have to find a way to break them loose, before reaching Valhalla."

Sid Servoss smiled wryly. "They might have orders to cut me down."

"I'll tell them Gaffney reinstated you, Sid, and signed Milt on as a captain, which'll outrank anyone out there."

"Can you swing it, baby?" Travers asked, with a dimpled grin.

"I'll swing it," Hean said. "You boys better pack two guns, though."

Servoss's sharp features brightened. "I saw a Confederate officer's coat in a closet somewhere—"

"Yes, and I think it'll fit Milt to perfection." Jean crossed the room and came back with the gray uniform coat. "This'll impress the troops." She held it up for Travers to slip his arms into the sleeves. It felt and looked custom-tailored for him. "You make a very handsome and gallant Rebel, Milton."

"Thank you, ma'am." Travers laughed like a boy. "I've always wanted a coat like this."

They sat around the dim pleasant room, smoking, drinking and talking, trying not to think too much about tomorrow.

"Did you break with Gaffney?" asked Servoss.

"I broke with the bastard!" Her voice was as ven-



omous as her smoky gray eyes. "I'll see that big ugly sonofabitch dead, if I have to kill him myself."

She wanted to sleep with somebody that night, one or the other. They all felt it, but no one knew how to solve the problem. Threesomes are awkward. One always has to be left out. Travers thought of it as the eternal triangle. It was always two against one, in various combinations. Jean Tremblay wasn't quite bold and reckless enough to suggest cutting cards or drawing lots or rolling dice to settle the matter.

They were all a little drunk when they went upstairs to their separate rooms, parting with casual good-nights, Jean carrying a brandy bottle with her.

Travers undressed and got into bed, but did not sleep at once, as he wished to. He heard her light steps at his door, the turning of the knob, but the door was locked. The footsteps moved away, paused at Servoss's room, and a latch clicked. Travers heard the door creak open and then close. He didn't feel hurt or jealous or left out. He was relieved more than anything. Travers smiled in the darkness. He could sleep now. He hoped it would be good for both of them, in the next room.

## ELEVEN

### *Rescue and Retreat*

In the garish reek and smoke of morning cookfires, Lieutenant Sanchez was again arguing heatedly with Tyler Capott and Monk Jeeter.

"I am in command here. I am the only commissioned officer. I was given this detail by General Pereda. You are insubordinate," Sanchez stated.

"Our orders from General Gaffney supersede yours," Capott said. "We was told to relieve you and take over. You are relieved as of now. Take your fancy-pants outfit and move out, mister."

"You hold no rank. You have no—"

"Screw the rank!" Capott said. "We're from Gaffney's personal staff. We don't need no goddamn rank. Just eat your breakfast and get out."

"I'll report you to General Pereda!" Sanchez threatened. "You'll stand court-martial for this." He was quivering with suppressed rage.

Monk Jeeter laughed aloud. "Piss on Pereda! He don't amount to nothing. Gaffney's in command of this ragged-ass army. Beat it, Sanchez. Take your tin soldiers back to Valhalla."

Sanchez glared in fury at them. "You'll answer for this!" He turned stiffly and marched back to the uniformed side of the bivouac, gesticulating to his non-commissioned officers.

"Jesus Christ!" Tyler Capott shook his head and

spat. "He wanted to charge that adobe, and get half his platoon killed off."

"Well, what are we going to do, Tyler?" asked Jeeter.

"We're going to wait. We're going to send a coupla boys into Monterrey for some dynamite, and blow them Ranger bastards to pieces tonight." Tyler Capott was towering and lank, with immense shoulders, a thrusting cobra head and beaked face. Beside him Jeeter looked like a small wrinkled baboon with reddish eyes and a walrus mustache. They wore dirty torn clothes and a pair of guns each, in marked contrast to the bright-uniformed cavalymen across camp. Their filthy bearded followers had bandoleers slung, in addition to regular shell belts with holstered pistols, and some carried carbines wherever they went. A tough crew.

They all watched with amusement and coarse epithets, as the Mexican platoon formed in double columns and cantered back into the foothills toward the eastern heights.

"Maybe they'll go and take Laredo all by themselves," Monk Jeeter remarked. "That Sanchez is hellbent on being a goddamn hero."

Tyler Capott heaved a sigh. "I can breathe better now. Them overdressed greaser dudes got on my nerves something awful."

"We gotta save enough of Lashtrow to collect that thousand-dollar bounty," Jeeter reminded.

"His head'll do it," Capott smirked. "If that's gone too, Gaffney'll just have to take our word on it."

From the window slits in the adobe wall, the Rangers watched the Mex cavalry move out in mild amazement. Forty less foemen to contend with.

"Looks like Capott and Jeeter want us all to themselves," Lashtrow said. "Well, it sure cuts the odds down."

"I just wish the platoon had ridden the other way," Rammel said. "If we make it outa here, they'll be between us and home."

Arch Loomis laughed. "Hell, if we can bust outa this trap, no goddamn greaser outfit can keep us from making it to Texas."

An hour or so later, Lashtrow saw two of the bandits ride out in the direction of town. "That's not too smart of 'em," he said. "The odds are only ten to four now. We could go out there and give 'em a battle."

Rammel nodded his fair shapely head. "That's about the odds we usually face, Lash. Things are looking better all the time."

It was noon when three riders appeared on the road out of Monterrey, and the hut was steaming hot under the high sun, thick with the odor of sweating horses and men and manure. Lashtrow trained his glasses on the newcomers, and murmured in surprise: "I'll be damned to hell and back! It's Jean Tremblay and Milt Travers and Sid Servoss, and Milt's wearing the coat of a Confederate Army captain."

Out in the open field, Capott and Jeeter were as astonished as the Rangers. "What the hell you doing here?" Capott demanded, as Jean and the two men rode up. She was too close to Gaffney to be taken lightly.

"New orders from General Gaffney," said Jean. "He wants them taken alive." The ruffians gaped awe-stricken at her queenly beauty.

Monk Jeeter's fiery gaze was fixed on Servoss. "Christ! We're supposed to shoot *him* on sight." Sid returned his stare with cool disdain.

"Sid Servoss has been reinstated by the General as a top sergeant, and this is Captain Milton, who will take command of this detachment."

"More goddamn rank!" snarled Capott. "What the

christ is going on anyway?" He kicked the ground and spat an amber stream of tobacco juice.

Jean Tremblay smiled serenely. "I'm merely passing on a directive from General Gaffney. If you don't like it, take your complaint to headquarters." Her icy composure made Capott feel like a helpless lout.

"This is my detail, goddamn it! Gaffney gave it to me. I just got rid of the frigging-Mexican cavalry, and you come up with this—"

"Watch your language there," Travers said, with severe dignity. "We can work together. I'm not one to pull rank or abuse authority. We won't have any trouble."

"You got written orders?" Jeeter asked, fingering his mustache.

"We don't need any," Jean Tremblay said. "General Gaffney was certain you'd respect verbal orders from me—and Captain Milton."

Capott and Jeeter were bewildered and suspicious, but Gaffney was the one man in the world they feared and Jean was his woman—some said wife. The stranger in the Rebel jacket had an air of command, and Servoss was a noted gunsharp. But it was Jean's presence that handcuffed them.

"How you going to make 'em surrender?" Capott inquired.

"Captain Milton will attend to that," Jean said haughtily.

"Your scarf, ma'am," Travers said, and took the white silk from her hand. He rode toward the adobe house, the white scarf held aloft. The rifles protruding from the narrow windows remained silent. Behind him, Jean kept her mounted position between the bandits and Servoss.

Travers raised his voice: "I call on you to surrender. It's your only chance."

"Come in closer and discuss the terms," Lash-

trow's voice responded. As Travers drew nearer, Lash went on: "What kinda game is this, Milt?"

"Thought you might like to get out of that trap. Throw out your weapons. Not all of them, of course."

Jean and Servoss were drifting in after Travers. Four carbines fell to the earth, followed by some handguns, flipped from the windows.

Travers turned in his saddle, shouting: "Two men up here, on the double! Come on, move it!" His gesture was an imperious whiplash.

A pair of renegades mounted and rode hesitantly forward. Capott, Jeeter and the rest started sidling toward their saddled and tethered horses, exchanging perplexed glances, mumbling obscenities.

"Get inside there," Travers ordered. "Make sure they're not hiding any weapons." He pointed to the entrance in the bullet-gouged wall.

The door opened, the two outlaws entered warily, pistols in hand, and Travers heard the impacts of steel against bone. Wheeling his dun, carbine in hand, as Jean and Servoss did likewise, they opened fire on the eight remaining hardcases, caught in the act of mounting their broncs. Gunshots speared back at them, going wild as the horses bucked, pitched and spun circles in the swirling dust. Explosions shattered the sunshine.

Four Rangers came out of the adobe, leading their horses, scooping up the discarded guns and swinging aboard, to follow the charge led by their rescuers, muzzle flames streaking ahead of them. As the range closed, two bandits spilled from the backs of sunfishing mustangs, and the others broke and scattered in headlong flight. The Rangers slammed shots after them, until they were out of reach, and then milled laughing and yelling around Jean Tremblay, Milt Travers and Sid Servoss.

"Glad you boys came all this way to save me," Travers said, dryly.

“Look at him in that Confederate coat!” Rammel said. “A damn Yankee from New England.”

The pair in the ruined house were just unconscious, Lashtrow knew, and their horses were standing by. The two out here were dead, and their mounts had fled after their fellows. Rising from examining the fallen, Lashtrow said: “Too bad we couldn’t have dropped Capott and Jeeter.”

“Never satisfied, are you, Lash?” asked Travers, in mock disgust.

“Well, I don’t mean to complain.” Lashtrow smiled as he introduced Jean and Servoss to Rammel, Larssen and Loomis. “Glad to see you, Sidney.”

“We know the lady from shipboard,” Loomis said. “Pleased to meet you, Sid.” Servoss shook their hands in turn with his warm gracious smile.

“You’re some kinda woman, Jean,” said Lashtrow. “What are your plans now?” His high-boned face was lighted with genuine admiration.

“I’m afraid you’re stuck with me, Lash. There’ll be a price on *my* head, after this one.” Jean laughed ruefully. “I suggest you all accept my hospitality in Monterrey, before we start the long haul to the Rio Grande.”

“That’s the ticket then, baby,” Lashtrow drawled, with his slow smile. “They’ll figure we headed straight home to Texas.”

Rammel took off his sweated hat and bowed to Jean. “Miss Tremblay, that was a superb performance. And Trav put on a great act, too.”

“I was born to command, that’s all,” Travers said soberly. “My namesake rode with William the Conqueror.”

“Quit bragging and break out that magic flask,” Lashtrow said. “We used up all our whiskey during the siege.”

Nils Larssen inhaled fresh air and looked up at the

molten blue sky. "God, but it's good to get outa that hot stinking adobe oven."

"Wait'll you see our quarters in town," Travers said, stripping off the gray coat as they jogged toward Monterrey.

Jean Tremblay had fallen in between Rammel and Lashtrow, her smile flashing from one to the other as they rocked along at an easy pace.

Sid Servoss caught Travers' blue eye. "Looks like Rammel has found favor with our lady bountiful."

"Yeah, Ram's a charmer," Travers said. "But when Lashtrow's around the women just naturally seem to gravitate toward him, for some reason."

"Well, I'm withdrawing from the field, Milt."

"Me, too," said Travers. "And Ram's a married man."

"We pulled it off better than I expected," Servoss said.

Travers nodded. "Thanks to Jean Tremblay. She should be in the theater, turning all the crowned heads of Europe." He became serious. "Sid, you really don't know who was behind that plot to assassinate Senator Muldoon?"

"I don't know. Jean may, but she's not telling. She's been raising funds for Gaffney, but she won't divulge the source. It looks like she's finished with Gaffney, after that coup she pulled today. But who knows?"

Milt Travers smiled thinly. "Who knows anything for sure about that woman? She's the American Lillie Langtry, Sid."

"Maybe Lashtrow can find out something."

"I doubt it," Travers said. "Not even Lashtrow."

The luxury of the borrowed brownstone manor was heavenly to the refugees from that embattled adobe.



After bathing, shaving, and dressing in clean outfits, there were drinks in plenitude of all varieties and a sumptuous dinner prepared and served by the household staff. It was an out-of-world experience for Nils Larssen and Arch Loomis, opulence beyond their wildest fantasies, but Jean Tremblay made them feel welcome and at home.

She chatted and laughed and flirted with all of them, but as Travers had predicted, her main interest was in Lashtrow.

Travers and Servoss might have preferred a quiet evening at home, but Rammel and Larssen and Loomis, recuperating with youthful resilience, wanted to take in the night life of Monterrey, and Milt and Sid felt obligated to show them around town.

Thus Jean Tremblay and Lashtrow were left alone in the peaceful and perfumed patio garden, under starry skies and a scimitar moon. The fountain tinkled like liquid silver, and nightingales and mocking birds sang from the magnolias and crepe myrtles, festooned with Spanish moss. In the distance sounded slow mournful Latin music, and the chiming of bells from mission towers. It was an idyllic romantic setting, but there was no romance in Lashtrow. The sheer beauty and sexuality of this woman left him cold. She sensed the estrangement at once.

"What's the matter, Lash? You liked me when your name was Lane."

"I was a different man then," he said whimsically.

"You certainly were! What's caused the drastic change?"

"Time and events, I reckon."

"You *are* a bastard! Perhaps you resent my getting you out of that adobe trap today?"

"Maybe so, but I doubt it. I'm grateful for that."

"What is it then?"

"Nothing," Lashtrow said flatly. "There's nothing

left, Jean. You should have tried one of the others. I don't mean Milt or Sid. They've been there. And Rammel's married—happily. But Loomis or Larssen would have been appreciative, and—”

Jean Tremblay slapped his face with vicious stinging force. Lashtrow had to rigidly restrain himself from striking back.

“Well, I guess that does it,” he said. “Shall we return to the manse?”

“You go wherever the hell you want to! Go find your friends and wallow in the sinkholes with them. Just get out of my sight.”

“You want me to leave the house?”

“That won't be necessary,” Jean Tremblay said, in calmer tones. “We're all leaving in the morning, aren't we?”

“You still want to come with us?”

Her laugh broke in the middle. “I don't have much choice now—do I?”

“You're welcome, of course,” Lashtrow said. “We wouldn't be riding out free, if it wasn't for you. Goodnight, Jean.”

There was no reply. He walked back into the house, poured a drink at the bar, and considered going out on the town in search of the boys. It didn't seem worth the effort. He needed sleep more than carousal. The hell with it. Lashtrow took a bottle of brandy and climbed the ornate curved stairway to the room he had been invited to share with Milt Travers.

He should have sounded Jean out, tried to learn something from her, instead of quarreling with her like a damn-fool schoolboy. But hell, she would have lied anyway; he wouldn't have got any truth out of her. At least he had resisted her lure.

Weary as he was, it required several slugs of brandy before Lashtrow could sink into sleep.

He awoke hours later when Milt Travers came in,

reasonably sober, and said: "I didn't expect to find you in *this* bed. What a night! We almost landed in jail after Loomis and Larssen decided to take over the Castile bordello. Fortunately Sid and I had enough money to bail us out."

"See any of our friends from Valhalla?" asked Lashtrow, sleepily.

Travers shook his tousled brown head. "No, but we heard the Mex army has started its march toward Laredo."

In the morning, Jean Tremblay was gone.

"We better move out fast before we have company," Lashtrow said.

"Yeah, she must've switched sides again," Sid Servoss said dully.

After a hasty breakfast, they saddled up and rode out of Monterrey, avoiding the main plazas and reaching the outskirts without being apprehended or challenged. It was a beautiful sunlit morning filled with vivid colors and fragrant scents, bird song and mission bells and plaintive guitar music.

Lashtrow started at the vision of a girl standing by a courtyard gate under the golden fluffballs of an opoponax tree, her head as bright as the blazing azaleas and camellias. Looked like Jean Tremblay, but it was not. A green parrot chattered in a palmetto, and a thrush lilted from yellow jasmine. Then the city was behind them, the foothills and mountains looming ahead. They passed the bullet-pocked adobe shell.

Dangerous as it might be, they had to take the same mountain passage they had come in on, in order to make time. The army would move across the open plains to the south, but there were likely to be patrols in the uplands. Particularly if Jean Tremblay had reported their presence. They rode warily on the lookout,

with Loomis and Larssen groaning and sweating out hangovers. They had packed enough liquor from the bar in the brownstone to last out the journey to Laredo, barring interruptions.

Lashtrow had the point and Travers the rear, with Rammel and Servoss riding herd on the two sick sailors.

The rough hills were patched raggedly with mesquite, scrub cedar and juniper and crimson manzanita. As they climbed higher the slopes were more thickly clothed with aspen, spruce and pine. Nearing the summit of the pass, Lashtrow smelled danger and called a halt. Leaving his sorrel with the others, he climbed the right wall to a vantage point and scanned the terrain with his fieldglasses.

Lieutenant Sanchez and his cavalry platoon were waiting for them, easily discernible in their blue tunics and scarlet breeches. They had set up an ambushade on either side of the defile. Lashtrow swore softly and spat tobacco juice. It would take a long hard climb around the highland wilderness to bypass the enemy, and Lash searched for the most feasible route. It seemed to lie on the north side, where breaks in the wall opened toward lower altitudes, but it would be tough going through dense brush, woods and boulders.

Descending rapidly, skidding and sliding in washes of shale and detritus, Lashtrow made his report: "Mex cavalry at the top of the pass. We'll have to swing wide to the left, and lead our horses most of the way."

"Jesus, that's all we need," Arch Loomis moaned.

"It's better than getting your head shot off, ain't it?" Nils Larssen said.

Loomis laughed. "I ain't sure, considering the condition of my head."

"Well, you could pull that long gun of yours and charge up the hill."

"That gun ain't so long no more."

"You wore it down to a nub last night," Larssen declared.

Rammel said: "There's a canyon branching north just around the bend."

"That's the one we're taking, Ram," said Lash-trow.

They stayed in the saddle the first hundred yards off the trail, letting the horses pick their way. Then the ground got so broken, brush-choked and rock-cluttered, they had to dismount and lead, working their way up a steep embankment, then down a long gradual slope. "We should have machetes in this goddamn jungle," Milt Travers panted. They reached a nearly dry creek bed and the terrain opened up a little, but there were still intermittent thickets and jumbles of stone. Finally they were able to mount again and let the sure-footed broncs do the work. Even at this altitude the August heat was intense, and men and horses were sweat-plastered, dripping.

The land cleared gradually and they seemed to be well past the danger point, crossing a mountain meadow, when lead crackled and whined through the sunbright air and shouts mingled with the reports behind them. Racing for the woods before them, they glanced over their shoulders and saw the uniformed cavalry break from the forest at the rear, looking theatrical and out-of-place in this wild setting.

Plunging to a stop under the sheltering pines, the six riders flung from the leather with carbines in hand, and took positions behind tree trunks or boulders. The Mexicans came on, about a dozen of them, shooting wildly at a gallop. The Americans opened fire, aimed, deliberate and steady, and three silver-embossed saddles were emptied quickly, breaking up the charge, turning it into a helter-skelter retreat. Back beyond range, the Mexes milled about, apparently waiting for reinforcements.

"We better keep moving," Lashtrow said, as they reloaded and walked to their horses. "There's about thirty more of the bastards somewhere."

Swinging aboard they filed on through the greenish haze of the pine forest, its fragrance now fouled by powdersmoke, hoofs sinking in brown mould.

"I'm telling yuh, I got that third one," Arch Loomis repeated. "Had him dead in my sights."

"Aw, you couldn't hit your ass with both hands," Nils Larssen said.

Emerging into another wide clearing, they lined eastward across it, the sun's blaze hot and heavy on their damp backs. Flashes of scarlet on a juniper ridge to the southeast caught Lashtrow's roving gray eyes, and then the wink of sunlight on steel barrels and silver trappings.

"There's the rest of the sonsabitches," he said quietly. "And they've got us cut off."

"Thirty all right," Travers said. "Maybe more."

There was only one way to go now—north. And that led into a bleak redstone canyon running between sheer high craggy walls, about as inviting as the mouth of hell, Lash thought. At least there'd be cover to fight from there, and perhaps it wasn't a dead-end. He kneed the sorrel left toward that objective, let him out in a full run, and the other five swung after him. Crooked Knife Canyon it was called, Lash remembered.

"The woods are full of 'em," Rammel yelled, almost gayly. "The bastards are everywhere."

"We're having a streak of luck," Sid Servoss said wryly. "And it's all bad."

"And I'm to blame for the whole goddamn thing," Milt Travers said bitterly, knowing with chill certainty that this was a dead-end canyon, if ever he saw one.

"The hell you are, Trav," said Rammel, grinning into the rush of air. "Fate rolls the dice. You can't take all the credit."

There was no more talking as they settled into a hard run for the raw red mouth of the canyon, the heated breeze of momentum whipping their squinted eyes and sweat-shining faces, hats tugging at chin straps.

Lack of cover precluded any attempt to hold the canyon entrance. The floor stretched bare and flat for hundreds of yards, traced only by sparse fringes of chaparral and mesquite, scattered spines of cactus. Where the walls bent eastward, there were mammoth boulders and clumps of rocks, adequate shelter for making a stand, if necessary. Trotting onward, they could only hope that the far end was open, giving them a chance to outrun the pursuit.

On reaching that natural ragged barricade at the bend, they stared eagerly to the east and perceived that the canyon seemed to end at a steep towering redstone cliff, a true box canyon as Travers had feared.

"From one goddamn trap to another," Lashtrow said in disgust, seeking out the safest place to conceal the horses.

Dismounting again, the broncs ground-tied behind a house-sized boulder, the men drank from canteens, dug more ammunition from saddlebags, and looked to their carbines and handguns.

"We're better off than we were in that adobe," Rammel drawled cheerfully. "Room to move and air to breathe and a clear field of fire."

Milt Travers nodded. "If they get to us across that wide open ground, it'll cost them plenty."

"Never get to us if our shells hold out," Sid Servoss said.

Arch Loomis and Nils Larssen were gulping medicinal brandy from saddlebag bottles, washed down with canteen water. They were still hung over.

The sky was brassy bright, but the canyon was already shadowed by the high western wall, as the men

moved about to select firing positions, strung across the breadth of the rocky floor. They lit up smokes and felt the sweat dry and cool on their bodies.

Lashtrow walked the line of defense, offered a suggestion here and there, and returned to his own central spot with Sid Servoss. Spaced out on either side of them were Larssen and Loomis, with Travers and Rammel at the extreme wings to lay on accurate enfilading fire.

"Well, that's about the best we can do, I reckon," Lashtrow murmured, and bit off a fresh chew of tobacco.

"Those Mexicans will never carry this position," Sid Servoss declared, puffing on a thin cheroot. And he thought: *If a man has to die here, he dies in damn good company.*

"Here they come!" Nils Larssen called out. "In all their goddamn glory."



## TWELVE

### *Invasion Force*

By the time Jean Tremblay brought Fogarty's guerrillas back to the brownstone mansion in Monterrey, the Rangers were well on their way homeward. Studying the girl's classic features, Fogarty couldn't tell if she were disappointed or relieved. He wondered if she herself knew.

"Well, they likely won't get far," Fogarty said. "Sanchez is in the mountains with a cavalry troop. What are you going to do now, lady?"

"I don't know." Jean shook her head in misery. "I really don't know."

"You never know, but it don't keep you from doing. You save those men and then you denounce them. You're the damnedest female I ever had the misfortune to know."

Jean's smile flashed at him. "You consider it wholly a misfortune?"

A grin deepened the scars in Fogarty's lean cheeks. "There have been compensations, shall we say?" He was a medium-sized man, compact and brick-square, who seemed much larger because of his bearing and manner. A veteran soldier-of-fortune, he had fought all over the globe, and now served as a special scout for General Greer Gaffney. "The army's on the march," he continued. "And I have to report to Gaffney."

"I'll go with you," Jean decided instantly. "If I

get there ahead of Capott and Jeeter, I can make it up with Greer."

"If you don't, he'll skin you alive or turn you over to Pereda's Apache. But if you want to risk it, lady, who am I to say nay?"

The Mexican army, despite its lack of uniforms and strict military discipline, was impressive and formidable, numbering about 1,700 now, all fully armed and heavy with ammunition. There were six companies of cavalry, four of infantry, and an artillery platoon with four big guns rumbling on mule-drawn caissons. There was a wagon train of provisions, as well as some 100 guerrillas and scouts, in details like those commanded by Capott and Fogarty. None of them, except possibly General Pereda himself, expected to sweep and conquer the State of Texas, but they were confident of inflicting severe damages and losses.

Fifty miles out of Valhalla, the army was bivouacked for night on the plains, when Fogarty's party overtook it. Laredo lay another 100 miles to the east. After placing his group in the encampment, Fogarty conducted Jean Tremblay to the command-post tent.

"I may be able to prevent his cutting your throat on sight," Fogarty said dryly.

"We shall hope so, at any rate," Jean said, with more lightness than she felt.

At headquarters they realized at once they were too late. Tyler Capott and Monk Jeeter were already there, and being thoroughly chewed out by Gaffney. The big general's voice boomed through the canvas walls, as Jean and Fogarty paused in outer shadows. A sentry moved toward them, but turned back at recognition of the loitering pair. He wasn't about to challenge Gaffney's woman and favorite chief scout.

"... You are the dumbest stupidest foolishst goddamn batbrained sonsabitches I ever saw anywhere in my life!" Gaffney roared on. "I'd put you before

a firing squad, but that'd be too christly good for you poor ignorant halfwitted feebleminded asshole bastards! . . ."

Gaffney went on ranting until he ran out of breath, and panted: "You got anything—to say—you crowbait cruds?"

"We'll get Lashtrow and them others, you give us a chance," Capott promised earnestly. "I swear to jeezus we will, General."

After a long painful silence, Gaffney resumed: "It just so happens, by some freak of luck, that you no-good worthless peckerheads have got one more chance coming. Word just came in that Sanchez has the six Rangers penned up in Crooked Knife Canyon. But he can't get at 'em, they're dug in so strong in a nest of rocks. He's already lost a dozen men trying to root 'em out, and it's come to a goddamn stalemate, a real Mexican standoff. So your job is to go in there and get 'em, you understand? Get 'em or die trying, I don't care which. 'Cause if you don't, I'll kill you shithead slobs in a lot worse way. You got that clear? You know where that canyon is? Naturally it's a box canyon, or they wouldn't be pinned down in it, for chrisake. Now move the hell out. I can't stand looking at you sorry sonsabitches any longer."

"If Sanchez can't do it with a whole troop of cavalry, how we going to do it with a squad?" Tyler Capott asked hoarsely.

"I don't give a goddamn *how*—just do it! Go and do it. No more talk. Get your asses outa here and go do the job!"

After Capott and Jeeter had departed, Fogarty glanced at Jean. "You still wanta see him?"

She shivered. "No, it wouldn't do any good. Not with him in that kind of a mood. Come on, Foge."

Jean Tremblay broke away, almost running through the shadows, and Fogarty stalked after her, trying to

place Crooked Knife Canyon in his mind, and remember something he had heard about it once.

Fogarty smiled and shook his head at the tongue-lashing those two men had taken. Capott and Jeeter weren't cowards either. They didn't fear anyone that Fogarty knew of except Gaffney. But Greer sure had them buffaloed. *They'll just take off and never come back*, he concluded. *Greer must know that, too. He just wanted to get rid of 'em, without killing 'em, I guess. He's got bigger things on his mind. And Greer told me once he wanted that Lashtrow himself.*

The plain was widely flowered with orange campfires, as Fogarty followed Jean around the perimeter. His squad had kindled their own cookfire, and the smell of frijoles, bacon, tortillas and chile rose from the heating utensils. He saw Jean's graceful figure limned in firelight, and wondered if she'd want to bed down with him tonight. Fogarty had enjoyed her intimate favors in the past. *Who the hell hasn't?* he thought ironically. Well, if she wanted to, he'd oblige her, but it didn't concern him that much now. One advantage of growing older: You weren't so woman-hungry anymore . . . . But she was very good, and if it were offered Fogarty wouldn't refuse. In his profession, you took what you could.

He got his tin plate, cup, fork and spoon out of his warbag, and saw that Jean had already collected hers, along with a bottle of brandy. She was quite a woman, quite a trooper, for all of her butterfly-brained ways and faults. She poured drinks for Fogarty and herself, and passed the bottle on to the boys, kidding and laughing with them. They adored her naturally, and why not? She was a helluva woman.

Fogarty was glad she hadn't gone into the command post. Gaffney might have reviled her, but he wouldn't have struck her in front of Fogarty. Gaffney respected Fogarty, as he did very few men. Too bad Jean was

so scatterheaded. She'd broken with Gaffney, and she should stay away from him. She had defied him flagrantly in rescuing those Rangers, and Fogarty wondered what had occurred to turn her so abruptly against the Texans. Lashtrow or some one of them must have spurned her advances.

"You think I'm crazy, don't you, Foge?" inquired Jean, halfway through the meal.

"Not exactly. You're many different women wrapped up in one pretty sweet bundle. If you ever find the real you, it'll be something—great."

Jean Tremblay laughed. "That's kind of nice, Foge."

Throughout supper and afterward, as they lounged about smoking, drinking and chatting idly, something about Crooked Knife Canyon nagged at Fogarty's mind. Jean knew about the place. She was thinking of going there herself, now that she'd found she couldn't face Gaffney. She was like a wind, blowing in every direction of the compass.

"I hate to think of those six Americans trapped in there by Mexicans," she said gravely. "They're real nice boys, all of them. You know Sid Servoss, Foge. Well, they're all like him, some of them perhaps even better."

"You mean Lashtrow?"

"I mean Lashtrow and Milt Travers and a boy named Rammel."

"Why did you turn them in, then?"

"I don't know. I got angry . . . . I *am* crazy, I guess."

Fogarty sipped brandy and sighed. "Sooner or later, Jean, you've got to decide which side you're really on. Definitely, for sure. And that time is here, I believe."

"I know, Foge, I know . . . . Would you help me? If I wanted to try and save those Rangers?"

"I might."

"You'll have to. I can't do it alone."

"I don't know how it can be done anyway," Fogarty said. "Enough riflemen up on the rim might swing it, but two rifles wouldn't be enough."

"Two would help. With the losses Sanchez has already suffered."

"Well, it's worth considering. I don't really owe this rabble of an army any loyalty. I haven't been paid in over a month. I'll give it some thought, Jean."

"Do you think Capott and Jeeter will go to Crooked Knife?"

"Not a chance. They'll head straight for the border."

Jean nodded, her head coppery bright in the firelight. "That's what I figured. We won't have them to contend with. We could do it, Foge!"

"Maybe," Fogarty conceded. "I always liked long shots. We'll see, Jean."

Long after he was blanket-wrapped, with Jean slumbering nearby, Fogarty lay awake striving to recall that vague elusive detail about Crooked Knife Canyon, something an old-timer had once told him in a smoky saloon over whiskey glasses. Straining so hard to remember made sleep impossible. Twisting, fretting, turning on the ground, Fogarty stared at the crescent moon caught in a swarm of stars. He had given up, determined to quest no more, anxious for the sleep he needed, when it suddenly came to him like a flicker of lightning.

There was a back way out of Crooked Knife Canyon, a narrow split through the base of the eastern cliff, hidden by talus debris at both ends. No one could see it or find it, unless he knew it was there. A cramped ragged passage through solid stone, barely high and wide enough to accommodate horsemen in single file. A secret tunnel out of a fairytale.

We'd better start tonight, right away, while the camp is sleeping, Fogarty thought, flinging off his blanket, buckling on his guns, and reaching out gently to awaken Jean Tremblay.

She awoke instantly and fully. They got the horses saddled, bridled and threw on their bedrolls. Jean was adept and efficient as a working cowhand. Their companions remained asleep, or gave no indication of awaking. A sentry saw them, but made no move in their direction. Jean and Fogarty came and went as they pleased.

"You know how to get there, Foge?" asked the girl.

"It's north and east of the pass. I can find it all right."

"What decided you to go?"

"There's a back way out of the canyon," Fogarty said. "An old buffalo hunter told me once. It saved him from the Comanches one time."

"That's beautiful!" Jean Tremblay exulted quietly.

Fogarty grinned bleakly. "Ain't it just that though?"

This irrational woman always got her way, and he was a fool to get involved. But he'd always liked Sid Servoss, and what he'd heard about Lashtrow and Travers.

## THIRTEEN

### *Crooked Knife Canyon*

Blanket-swathed in his bouldered niche, Lashtrow blinked sand-lidded eyes and waited for sunup. The cold ached in old wounds, and the taste of cordite was still rank in his dry mouth. He doubted the enemy would attack again this morning. Yesterday afternoon they had attempted a foolhardy mounted assault, which cost them many casualties. Last night they had come in on foot, and been replused again. There'd been little moon but enough starlight to shoot by, and scant cover available to the Mexicans. They had no chance against the strongly entrenched Rangers. Lash imagined their commander had sent for reinforcements from the main force, and wouldn't strike again until help arrived.

Between battles, Lashtrow had searched the back eastern wall for possible escape routes, but discovered nothing. There were no breaks in the almost perpendicular cliff, no way out of this redstone box, and no source of water. This day would be pure hell when the sun rose high enough to bake and blister them in their rocky barricade. Larssen and Loomis suffered yet from their excesses in Monterrey, but they had fought well. They would make good Rangers, if they lived to get out of this trap. The shooting of Travers and Rammel on the flanks had been spectacular, as Lash expected, and Servoss had been steady and solid in the center.

*If the bastards ever take us, they'll pay a terrible price, Lashtrow thought. And it'll be because we run*



*out of shells and water, no other way. Unless they send in a full company, which could overrun us no doubt, in case they're willing to accept fifty per cent losses.* But Lash figured Greer Gaffney was too smart a military man to waste a company on six men, regardless of how much he wanted to wipe out those six.

*They'll probably get some snipers up on the rimrock today, aiming to catch us like fish in a dry barrel. But it won't be that easy,* Lash concluded. *Those rims are knife-edged, and the snipers will have to expose themselves to get a decent crack at us. We'll pick 'em off before they hurt us much, I'll guarantee that.*

Cramped, sore and stiff, Lashtrow cast off his blanket and rose to walk the line. Servoss, half-awake, winked sleepily at him. Loomis and Larssen were snoring heavily in their positions. On the left wing, Rammel stood up and grinned, teeth very white in his powder-grimed face.

"Glad you're having such a fine restful holiday, Lash."

Lashtrow grinned back at him. "You're worse than I am, Ram. You could be home in a nice soft bed with Tess."

"Don't remind me," the Virginian drawled. "I might get dissatisfied with this rock quarry."

"Watch the rims today, Ram."

Rammel nodded his blond head. "Expect they'll get somebody up there. Hope they don't shoot any better than the rest."

Lashtrow flipped his hand and turned to walk across the canyon floor to the other side, where Milt Travers was hunkered down at ease smoking a cigarette. In any predicament, Milt retained a certain grace and elegance.

"You're up early, Lash."

"Couldn't sleep after all that racket last night."

Travers smiled. "We tore 'em up pretty good. They won't be back right away."

"Reckon not, Milt." Lashtrow rolled a smoke for himself. "Likely go on top today."

"Figured that." Travers' smile widened. "Hope Red Bush and the Fox are having as much fun in Laredo as you're having on your extended vacation."

Lashtrow laughed softly. "They couldn't be."

"You know, Lash." Travers sobered and grimaced. "I should've left you a message in Laredo. No need of you guys being in this mess at all."

"Forget it, boy. We wanted to come. Just used you as an excuse."

"I know better. But it's too late to play that hand over . . . . How long will it take that Mex army to get to Laredo?"

Lashtrow inhaled thoughtfully. "Five-six more days anyway."

"There's no way to defend that town."

"Not unless the U. S. Army gets there," Lashtrow said. "Should've killed Gaffney and Pereda before they got started. Thought of that in Valhalla."

"So did I, Lash. But it would've meant dying with 'em. Which would've done a lot more good than dying out here in this god-forgotten canyon, that's certain." Travers' finely cut features were morbid, under the dirt and powder stains.

Lashtrow grinned through cigarette smoke. "We aren't dead yet, Milt. You and Jean and Sid performed one miracle. Maybe somebody'll come up with another."

"Sure. It'll take a real big one here." Travers' smile lighted his blue eyes. "But what the hell? Hope springs eternal, and where there's life, and all those old quotes. You got to believe, Lash, got to have faith."

"I'm a believer." Lashtrow slapped his shoulder.

"Faith and hope, ammunition and water. Six Texans against all of Mexico. What more do you want?"

"Nothing at all," Milt Travers said merrily. "Nobody dies. I'm just sorry I screwed up your vacation, pardner."

Lashtrow laughed with him. "Hell, I did that myself, Milton. Long before you got into the act."

Travers stood up, yawning and stretching. "Let's go to headquarters and brew up some coffee. It's not bad if you put enough brandy in it."

"We've got more brandy than we have water," Lashtrow said. "Thanks to the world-traveling friends of hostess Jean Tremblay."

"What the hell did you do to Jean that night?" Travers asked. "To make her disappear that way."

"Not a thing."

"Ah, that's the answer," Travers declared. "No wonder she turned against us. If you couldn't deliver, you should have stepped aside for another stud."

Lashtrow smiled dimly. "I suggested that. And she didn't like it."

"I still can't see her going back to Gaffney, after crossing Capott and Jeeter and springing us."

"I don't understand anything that woman does, Milt."

Travers spread his palms. "Who the hell does?"

As the sun soared toward its zenith and the canyon became a red-hot furnace, Mexican snipers appeared overhead along both rims to hammer shots down at the jagged stone barrier which sheltered the Americans. Pelted with sand and rock splinters, the Texans flattened and squirmed around to return the fire. As Lashtrow had anticipated, the riflemen above had to show heads, shoulders and arms in order to train their weapons. After two or three greasers on each rimrock were drilled by Ranger sharpshooters, the enemy withdrew and abandoned that method of attack.

The afternoon passed in relative peace and quiet, with heat and thirst tormenting the defenders far more than any hostile activity.

The early shadows spread by the western cliffs came as a blessed and welcome relief to the sun-scorched, sweat-drenched men on the canyon bottom. They drank but sparingly from their canteens, and preserved their cartridges like misers. They dreamed of ice-cold beer and cool green depths of water, of springs gushing crystal clear from the earth. Travers thought of the pure white snow he had once detested in Boston winters, and longed to be buried to the neck in it.

Dusk flowed gray and azure, mauve and amethyst, into deepening pools, and darkness settled as an ultimate benediction. They nibbled at sparse rations, nipped from canteens, and had little taste for liquor or tobacco, at this stage.

"They're waiting for reinforcements," Lashtrow said. "I doubt they'll come tonight, but we'll have to stand watches."

"Never thought I'd see the time when I didn't want to drink booze or smoke tobacco," Arch Loomis said sadly.

"Nothing worse than a reformed drunk," chortled Nils-Larssen.

"When it cools off you'll feel different, Arch," said Sid Servoss. "You'll want to drink and smoke in a few hours."

"I hope so," Loomis said. "It ain't natural to feel this way, nohow."

"It's bad when even a chew don't soothe your throat," Lashtrow admitted.

Rammel laughed. "We're in sorry shape when we can't smoke or drink or chew."

"I'm going to try all three before long," Milt Travers said. "Not necessarily in that order."

"A good chance to clean and oil our weapons,"

Lashtrow suggested. "Don't want any guns jamming when the big push comes."

When that chore was completed, Travers broke out a bottle to pass around, and everyone drank lightly and felt better.

The Mexicans made a few tentative thrusts that night, but they didn't get far before swift accurate carbine fire whipsawed and drove them back. Anxious to save precious shells, Lashtrow shouted a quick "Cease fire!" as soon as the enemy began to withdraw. •

"They're just horsing around," Lashtrow said. "They won't come in earnest till they get a lot more help."

"Which could be soon now," Sid Servoss said.

"Maybe tomorrow," Lash agreed.

This night seemed colder, and he thought it was on account of exhaustion, lack of sleep and proper food. They donned brush jackets of denim or rawhide, and bundled in blankets and tarps.

Lashtrow awoke shivering in pre-dawn grayness, the canyon drowned in damp mist, and heard Milt Travers' warning call float in from the right flank: "Something big coming, boys. Better get ready." They couldn't see anything in the fog, but they heard ominous swelling sounds from the canyon mouth, as if a great host of horsemen were preparing to launch an all-out offensive.

*Must be a hundred or more men out there*, Lashtrow estimated. *The crazy bastards are going to throw a full company at us, and to hell with the casualties.* Servoss was awake and aroused Loomis, while Lash summoned Larssen. "Holy Jesus!" the Swede said, listening hard. "Sounds like the whole goddamn army out there." He set about kindling a small fire, from the dried shrubs and twigs they had scraped together.

They'd need hot coffee laced with brandy, if nothing else.

Lashtrow called Travers and Rammel in from the wings, and they came shawled in blankets with carbines in hand. "Better bunch up to meet this one," Lash said, recalling the strategy of the old British square in facing tremendous odds. By tumbling rocks about stationary boulders, they could fort up in the middle and fire in all four directions.

The horses were saddled and ready. "To go where, for chrisake?" Lash muttered, as he tightened the double cinches on the sorrel and tied on his bedroll behind the cantle. Envisioning an endless hordé of riders coming through the white vapors, Lashtrow knew fear as never before. The situation was hopeless. No matter how fast and straight they fired, they were bound to be overwhelmed and cut to pieces by sheer force of numbers. They couldn't kill enough Mexes to stem this tide, if it came in company strength. It was the Alamo all over again, on a smaller scale.

"I hope to God Alice Whittaker and her two kids get out of Laredo," Milt Travers said, removing the grainbag from his coyote dun's head.

"They'll evacuate all the civilians," Lashtrow said. "The Whittakers will be safe, Milt."

After heaving and hauling rocks about to form a small square fort, they drank their breakfast of brandy-spiked coffee around the tiny fire. A dense gray haze still filled the canyon, and the sky was lightening but slowly. The sounds of the enemy seemed to increase in volume, coming through the portentous hush that precedes a storm. The steaming beverage warmed and cheered them, adding flavor to the first smoke of the day. Rechecking their weapons, the Texans filled their pockets with additional cartridges.

"We probably shoulda made a run for it, when the odds were only forty to six," Sid Servoss mused.

Rammel shook his fair head. "No, Sid. If we'd done that we'd be dead. This way we're still alive. Bought a little time, at least."

Arch Loomis laughed. "The Swede and me wanted fun and excitement. We sure as hell got it."

"Some people think getting hit in the head is fun," Nils Larssen said.

"You got a trip around the world in Monterrey," said Loomis.

"And look at where it ended up," Larssen said dourly.

They were all afraid, Lashtrow knew, just like he was, sick inside because in a few hours, or less, they'd be dead and it would be all over. Nobody wanted to die, it was so damned *final*. The world would go on just as if nothing had changed, but you'd be gone, out of it, and never know what happened afterward. As if you'd never lived at all. It wasn't fair. No second chance. You'd been cheated somehow. There should be something *more*, some meaning or purpose or answer or reason. It couldn't all end in nothing, empty blackness forever. There was so much left to do and see, touch and feel, smell and taste and hear, so much to think and talk about, laugh or weep over, share with friends. So many dreams and memories.

It wasn't right that all the living a man had done should end in a void of nothingness. All the beauty and joy and pain erased, wiped out, left blank and vacant. There had to be more to it than eternal darkness.

Lashtrow thought of all those who had died, old and young alike. If you could be with them again, the ones you loved and liked, it would be all right, heaven enough. But he feared they were gone, lost, snuffed out like separate candles, as you would be in turn, nothing and nowhere, just plain dead.

The hell with it. Lashtrow drank deeply and bit into

a plug of tobacco. It was something every man and woman had to face alone. *So come on, you Mexican sonsabitches . . . . We'll take plenty of you down with us.*

"I thought I wanted to be a Ranger," said Arch Loomis. "But I'm beginning to wonder why."

Nils Larssen grinned sourly. "There's easier and safer ways to make a living. But a man with a long gun like yours, Arch, owes it to Texas."

"Everybody told me it was no job for a married man," Rammel said. "I see what they meant now."

"I just wish some of the Cabots and Lodges back home could see me now," Milt Travers murmured. "They always said I'd come to no good end."

"My old man said I was born to be hanged," Sid Servoss put in. "Looks like he was wrong, for once in his life."

"Well, I've already lived longer than my father did," Lashtrow said solemnly. "So I been getting by on borrowed time, I reckon."

"Cheerful bunch of bastards," Larssen grumbled, spinning the cylinder of a .44. "Holding a goddamn wake before there's any corpse."

"Pass the bottle," Loomis pleaded. "Mama predicted I'd die drunk, and I don't want to disappoint her, God bless her."

Sid Servoss was thinking: *I got out of two tight ones, that massacre on Galveston Island and the fiasco at the Muldoon house in Laredo. They say it's the third one that gets you.*

"They're getting ready to come," Rammel said, keening the misted air.

Lashtrow raised his left hand. "I hear something behind us." They all turned to peer into the vapors that concealed the eastern wall. "Nobody could've got in back of us, for chrisake." But someone was stirring in the fog there, hoofs clinking on the stone surface.



A man's voice came through the veiled grayness: "Don't fire! I'm a friend, here to help. Ain't got the password but I'm on your side."

"Who the hell are you?" Travers challenged. "And how'd you get here?"

"There's another way outa here." The blurred dark shape of a man leading a horse became visible in the haze, moving warily toward them.

"*Fogarty!*" cried Sid Servoss, lining his carbine from the hip.

"Don't shoot, Sid," the apparition said. "I'm here to get you out, goddamn it!"

"Come on in, Foge," said Servoss, keeping his carbine on the ghostly intruder. "What the hell goes on anyway?"

"There's a pass through the cliff, just big enough for one rider at a time."

"I couldn't find it," Lashtrow said.

"It's just a slit, covered with shale. You have to know it's there," Fogarty explained. "Come on, for chrisake! The Mexes'll be charging any minute."

At that moment the attack started, the clattering thunder of hoofs filling the clouded canyon. Fogarty mounted at once, and the Texans ran to catch up reins and swing aloft on their broncs. Fogarty led them toward the distant eastern barrier, the enemy onslaught hurtling toward the barricade at their rear, shooting from their ponies, a hail of bullets shredding the mist and screeching off boulders, flames streaking the foggy air. The assault slowed in bewilderment at receiving no return fire, suspecting that the line of defense might be mined with explosives of some nature. A voice soared: "*Andale!* There go the gringos."

Nearing the base of the cliff, the Rangers saw another rider waiting by a drift of talus debris, and Lashtrow yelled: "I don't believe it! I just by God don't believe it!" He had identified Jean Tremblay, and his

comrades reacted in similar fashion as they recognized the girl. It was fantastic, incredible, way beyond belief. Jean Tremblay appearing like a phantom from nowhere to save them one more time.

Fogarty pulled up beside Jean, the others milling about on excited rearing and pitching horses. The Mexicans were coming on again, faster than ever, their shots droning and howling ever closer now, sparking off the sheer rock face in showered chips.

“Get into that hole!” Fogarty shouted. “One by one. It goes all the way to the outside.”

“Take Jean through first,” Lashtrow said, wheeling his sorrel to open fire at the onrushing cavalry, holding the horse steady with his knees.

Travers and Rammel turned with him to unleash their carbines, and uniformed Mexes were ripped from their saddles. Loomis and Larssen were fighting to control their bucking, spinning claybanks. First Jean and then Fogarty disappeared into the black aperture at the foot of the cliff.

Nils Larssen had almost reached the tunnel entrance when lead struck solidly, his horse reared high and bugling, and another slug smashed into the Swede's spine. He fell backward into a heap of shale, and the stricken claybank landed squarely on top of him, crushing the last light and life from Larssen's body. Arch Loomis screamed in protest, trying to dismount and aid his partner, but Lash whirled back to smack the horse's rump and drive it at the dark opening. Arch ducked and vanished into the rock corridor, still bleating curses.

Sid Servoss swung down to help Larssen, and a bullet flung him against the cliff beside the entrance, carbine flying free. Sid tried to struggle upright, but there was no strength or feeling in his legs. Sitting back on the wall, he sighed and pulled his sixguns.

"I knew it," Servoss said. "Three times and out." Thank God he could use his hands and arms anyway.

Lashtrow was raging at Travers and Rammel: "Hit that goddamn hole! Go on, for chrisake, you'll get us all killed here!" Reluctantly, their carbines emptied, Rammel and then Travers rode bent low into the passage. Lash sheathed his spent Winchester, drew his right-hand Colt, and halted beside the hunched motionless Servoss. "Come on, Sid. Get up here. Mate can carry double." Lead droned and ricocheted all around them.

Servoss shook his head weakly. "Can't move. My goddamn legs. Go on, Lash. I've had it."

Lashtrow slid down and reached for Sid's armpits. "I'll lift you on."

"My back's broken, Lash. Get outa here, goddamn you! I know—I'm done for." Slugs snarled past and sprayed stone particles stung them.

Lashtrow stared into Sid's eyes and face, and saw that he was dying, death already fading his fine features. Lash tried to speak but his throat was choked full. He turned, emptied his .44 at the enemy, climbed aboard and booted the sorrel into the black hole in the wall, his eyes smarting and his throat aching. The horse picked a way through the inky labyrinth.

Out at the mouth, Sid Servoss smiled wanly and started shooting at the oncoming horde, close enough now to be easy marks. He saw at least two of his targets crumple and fall, while the attack slowed and faltered. Servoss had checked them momentarily, at least. More bullets found and chopped him, his hammers clicked empty, and Sid saw and felt nothing more.

Lashtrow was the last one out of the tunnel. Travers said, "Sid and Nils?" Lash just shook his sweaty head, and counted faces in the dimness. Besides Milt, Fogarty was there with Rammel and Loomis, reloading

weapons, their faces drawn and powder-blackened in the gloom. Loomis was crying openly like a child, Rammel swearing softly and steadily. Jean Tremblay was nowhere in sight. Lash's eyes swept the shrouded landscape.

"Where the hell's Jean?"

"Damned if I know," Fogarty said. "Just disappeared. When I got out here she was gone."

"We could stay here and pick the bastards off one by one," Milt Travers suggested, reining down on his *bayo coyote*.

"Too much time." Lashtrow scanned the steep rock-strewn slope above the mouth of the passage. "We can roll boulders down to block the opening. Take them hours to break through."

"That's the thing to do," Rammel agreed. "Might take 'em all day."

Lashtrow looked at Fogarty. "We're obliged to you, Mr. Fogarty."

"*Por nada*," Fogarty said. "Nothing at all. It was Jean's idea. I just happened to know about this hidden pass."

"A good thing for us you did." Lash sized him up as a sound replacement.

Fogarty shook his graying head. "Took too god-damn long to clear away the shale. Otherwise everybody could've got out, clear and easy."

"I just can't figure that woman," Lashtrow said, wagging his bronze head, spitting away the foul taste of gunpowder.

"Don't ask me," Fogarty said, with a short laugh. "First she wants me and my squad to take you guys in to Gaffney. Then she wants me to help her get you outa here. Beats the hell outa me."

"Well, let's start moving some rocks," Lashtrow drawled.

“Seems like that’s all we’ve been doing lately,” Rammel said wryly.

“Was Sid still alive, Lash?” asked Travers.

“Yeah, but he didn’t have long. Back broken, couldn’t move his legs. But he had two loaded Colts ready for the sonsabitches, and he was smiling—or trying to.”

“That’s my man,” Milt Travers said softly.

The fog was thinning and lifting, and the eastern horizon grew luminous and took on color, pink and lemon and violet, as they labored to seal the tunnel mouth with rocks and shale. It seemed as if a lot of people were missing. Nils Larssen and Sid Servoss. *It might have been any other two of them*, Lashtrow thought, blinking sweat out of his eyes.

And Jean Tremblay was gone, too. It made you wonder if she were real.

## FOURTEEN

### *On the Home Front*

Rusty Bouchard and Fox Edley had been busy enough in Laredo, but it wasn't the type of work they would have chosen. At first they were deskbound, buried in paper work, hogtied to telephones and the telegraph office, harassed by anxious citizens of both races. Then, when scouts reported the enemy army of 2,000 within twenty-five miles of the Rio Grande, they had to arrange for the evacuation of the civilian inhabitants, and their headaches increased astronomically.

Most of the people had no place to go, and no money to get anywhere. Nobody wanted to leave their homes, possessions and businesses, poor as they might be. The Mexican population was in a quandary. Many had relatives across the border in Nuevo Laredo and elsewhere, but having become Americanized, for the most part, they were afraid to cross the river. A large number of Texas men and some Mexes elected to stay and fight, regardless of the overwhelming odds. Among those who refused to leave was Senator Muldoon, who had become quite a hero after shooting down the outlaw Kansas, and trying to claim credit for Burke Coram, as well.

San Antonio was designated as relief center for the refugees, and the Missouri Pacific Railroad provided special trains to transport those who couldn't or wouldn't travel by horseback or wagon. The state, of course, would be billed by the railway for these ex-

penses. All available Rangers and Border Patrol personnel were being detailed to Laredo, but none of the belatedly promised units of the U. S. Army had made an appearance, as yet. Bouchard and Edley were enormously relieved when Captain Bill McKenna and staff arrived from Austin to take charge of the Laredo office.

There had been no word from Lashtrow, Rammel, Travers and the two new recruits, Larssen and Loomis, which worried the Rangers as much as anything, perhaps more.

"Why in Christ's name would five men undertake an invasion of Mexico?" Cactus Bill McKenna wanted to know. "What in hell did they expect to accomplish, for the luvva gawd? Lash and Milt must've gone outa their goddamn minds altogether!"

"Lash and Ram and the sailors went in there to save Milt," said Bouchard. "You know Travers disappeared after that fracas at Muldoon's."

"It still don't make any christly sense," McKenna declared. "Throwing away four more lives after one."

"There was no crisis here at that time, Cap'n," said Fox Edley. "The Mex army was still rooted in Valhalla. Laredo was in no danger. Matter of fact, Red Bush and I wanted to go with 'em."

"You would!" McKenna said, in deep disgust. "Being just as goddamn coot-crazy and brainless as they were. Too bad you didn't go. Then I'd been rid of seven moron maniacs instead a just five. Get off your dead butts now, and go help load people onto the train."

Once outside, Bouchard and Edley broke into laughter, knowing that McKenna's scathing tirade meant nothing. He was as concerned as they were about Lash, Milt, Ram and the rest.

"If old Cactus couldn't bellow like that he'd bust wide open," Fox Edley said, his yellow eyes dancing in his tough scarred face.

“Yeah, he has to holler. It goes with the job.” Bouchard clawed his russet beard. “But they oughta be back by now, Fox, if they was all right. “By Jesus, if I knew where they was I’d go out after ’em, and to hell with Cactus Bill!”

“So would I, Rusty. But we’d be shooting blind in the dark. Ain’t no telling where they are.”

“They don’t need us at the train. Let’s sneak in the Border House and wet our tonsils down.”

“That’s the best idea you’ve had in a month, Red Bush,” said Fox Edley.

In the lobby they both winced at the appearance of Senator Muldoon, but it was too late to dodge or hide. His bulbous nose and veined cheeks were redder than ever, and his chin jutted even more.

“You boys got that bridge mined?” he demanded.

“Sure have, Senator.”

“When you going to blow it?”

“About time it’s loaded with Mexican troops,” Bouchard said. “No sense wasting dynamite on an empty bridge.”

“Good, good, that’s fine,” Muldoon said. “Now if that goddamn derelict army would show up, we could make a strong stand.”

“The bridge ain’t that important,” Fox Edley said. “There’s plenty of fords and the river’s low this time of year. They can cross most anywhere.”

Muldoon snorted. “I know that! But it’ll slow ’em down considerably. They’ll have trouble getting the artillery over.”

“They’ll use the big guns from the other side,” Bouchard said.

Muldoon glared in exasperation. “I know *that* too! Wasting my time talking to you saddle tramps. I’ll see Captain McKenna himself.” He stormed on out into the street, with the two Rangers grinning after him.

“He’ll wish he was back playing pool with Mag-



dalene, if he busts in on Cactuſ Bill today," Edley said gleefully.

They were drinking at the bar, when a pleasant cultured voice spoke behind them: "Pardon me, gentlemen. Have you heard anything from Lashtrow and his friends in Mexico?" It was Henry DeWitt, immaculate and smiling, his face smooth and pink under the noble balding head. He ordered a bottle, and they repaired to a table by the window overlooking the Rio Grande.

"Not a thing, Henry," said Bouchard. "And we're beginning to worry some."

"So am I." DeWitt's forehead crinkled. "I've heard rumors but nothing definite. That they'd been trapped and escaped both times. And finally, almost home, they'd been captured and held on Blue Mesa."

Bouchard and Edley straightened in their chairs. "Jesus Christ!" said the Fox. "If that's true, we better get over there."

"I suggested that Captain McKenna send help," DeWitt told them. "But he declined, on the grounds it was simply a rumor."

"We'll go anyway," Rusty Bouchard growled. "Orders be goddamned."

Henry DeWitt smiled. "I thought you might, knowing how you feel about Lash and Travers and Rammel. If I were twenty years younger, I'd go with you."

"You think it's true then?" Fox Edley squinted amber eyes at him.

"I'm afraid it is, boys. I know definitely that Greer Gaffney set a thousand-dollar price on Lash's head, after losing those seven men in Galveston."

"Well, thanks Henry. Like to stay and talk with you, but we gotta move fast." Bouchard drained his glass and shoved back his chair.

"Take the bottle along," DeWitt invited. "No cantinas around Blue Mesa. You know that country?"

"We know it," Edley said grimly. "Thanks again, Henry. Nice to see you." He corked the bottle and strode after Rusty's stumpy bowlegged form.

Henry DeWitt's smile faded and his eyes narrowed as he watched them go.

Riding down toward the river, saddlebags and bedrolls and warbags packed hastily, Bouchard and Edley watched either side of the street, as was their custom. In a ragged knot of idlers at a tie-rail before a saloon, Red Bush thought he glimpsed two vaguely familiar figures, one lanky, the other dwarfed, detach themselves from the group and slip quickly through the batwing doors, as the riders approached.

"Looked like Capott and Jeeter," Bouchard reined up and Edley pulled alongside. "Think we oughta take a look, Fox?"

"Ain't got time, Rusty," said Edley. "There's enough lawmen in town now to handle them bastards."

"Reckon you're right. But it makes you wonder how many of them sonsabitches have filtered in here already."

They trotted on to ford the shallows of the Rio Grande, bypass Nuevo Laredo, and strike west toward the high sharp-profiled, slate-colored butte known as Blue Mesa, a landmark about twenty miles into Old Mexico.

"Henry always seems to know what's going on everywhere, both sides of the border," Bouchard remarked.

"He's got a better information service than us Rangers," Edley grumped. "Henry's a smart man, and a nice generous man."

Bouchard snorted and spat brown. "It ain't hard to be bighearted when you got a few million bucks."

"Just the same, a lotta rich bastards are tighter'n the bark on a ironwood tree."

"True as true can be, Fox," admitted Bouchard. "I

"I got no call to badmouth Henry DeWitt. He was a great man in Washington once, you know."

It was Fox Edley's turn to snort and spit. "I wouldn't give a tin nickel for all our great men in Washington. They stink to heaven, Red Bush."

Bouchard grinned through his coppery beard. "You can't expect politicians to smell sweet, Foxcroft."

They pushed the horses at a steady ground-eating trot to make good time, as the sun started its descent in the western sky and glared red and hot into their faces. Blue Mesa was already visible, looming over the barren flats, and Fox Edley began to wonder why anyone would hold prisoners on a place that stuck out so prominently, known and seen for miles around. Didn't make sense, when you stopped to consider it.

Rusty Bouchard must have been experiencing similar thoughts, for he said abruptly: "This begins to look like a goddamn wild-goose chase, if I ever saw one."

"Yeah, I got the same notion," Edley agreed. "Henry's intelligence service musta been way off the beam this time."

"When that sun sinks lower we'll be blind as bats. Anybody could pick us off."

Edley nodded. "Thought I saw a rider ahead once, but I couldn't be sure. Lost him now anyway in the goddamn glare."

A voice hailed them from a draw on the right side: "Hey, you Rangers! Don't open up on me, for chrisake. I'm Quinn from the Border Patrol."

Bouchard and Edley had hauled their carbines out of the saddle boots and lined them on the draw, but held their fire as a lone rider emerged and they saw it was Quinn, a stubby mustached scout from Laredo, cantering toward them with his hands held wide.

"You come from Blue Mesa way?" asked Bouchard.

Quinn nodded. "From there and beyond, and I saw nothing but snakes and lizards and prairie dogs."

"You climb the butte, Quinn?" asked Edley.

"I scoured the top of the goddamn thing. Bare as a cue ball. Nothing up there."

"Well, that saves us some time and miles," Bouchard said. "Let's head for home."

Turning their backs to the fiery blaze of sunshine, they rode back toward the Rio Grande, three now instead of two.

"Somebody wanted us outa town," Fox Edley mused.

"It must tie in with Capott and Jeeter being there," Bouchard said.

Edley reached into his saddlebags for the bottle. "Could be another go at Muldoon. I don't know why, but someone wants the Senator rubbed out."

"Could be." Bouchard took his swig, and passed the whiskey on to Quinn.

"Thanks." Quinn accepted and upended the bottle. "But you guys are way ahead of me. I dunno what you're talking about."

Fox Edley laughed. "Neither do we. Nobody's ahead of you, Quinn. We're all right behind the eight ball."

In the Paradise Saloon in Laredo, Tyler Capott and Monk Jeeter sat at a table in the rear corner with their guns in their laps, watching the slatted swing-doors outlined against the sunlit street. Men entered, the hinges squealing, but not the pair they were looking for.

"They didn't stop," Jeeter said. "Musta kept right on."

"Yeah, I guess they're gone." Capott sheathed his

Colt, and poured two drinks from the bottle on the table. "Drink up, Monk."

"Who the hell would pay a thousand dollars to get Muldoon knocked off? He's old enough to die naturally." Jeeter put away his pistol.

"They woulda paid more," Capott grumbled. "We got suckered, Monk."

"Well, it's the easiest thousand we'll ever make, Tyler."

Capott raised his massive shoulders and shook his cobra head. "You think so? Don't forget Kansas and Coram got killed trying it."

Jeeter grinned like a chimp. "They musta got god-awful careless."

"Overconfident, just like you," Capott said. "Specially that kid Kansas. That gets men killed. It's never as easy as you think."

"Who's putting up this money?"

"Don't know or care." Capott laughed. "Long's it ain't counterfeit."

Jeeter drank and tweaked one drooping end of his mustache. "We gotta get outa here before Gaffney comes."

"He'll never get across the river. That riffraff army of his'll fall apart, soon as somebody starts shooting at 'em. He's lost his best men, between Galveston and Muldoon's and us."

"He's still got Fogarty's crew."

"Maybe not. I heard Foge had pulled out on him, too."

"Hell, Greer won't go far."

"He won't get nowhere," Tyler Capott said. "We'll wind up ahead of him. But we shoulda asked a thousand apiece."

"Where do we hit him, Tyler?"

"He's speaking at the Lone Star Club tonight. When he comes out, we blast him."

“What we going to do till then?”

“Well, we don’t wanta drink too much. Might’s well go down the line and get laid. They got some new gals at the Queen’s Corral, I hear.”

“That ain’t a bad idea,” Monk Jeeter said. “I got sick of that Mex meat in Valhalla. Let’s try some of the white stuff.”

Tyler Capott thumbed a match alight and held it to his cigar. “How’d you like to hump that woman of Gaffney’s, Monk?”

“Jeezus! That bitch sure blinkered us, but what a piece! She only puts out for generals though.”

“The hell she does! She can be had, Monk.” Capott drew on his stogie. “And I heard tell she’s right here in town.”

Jeeter wagged his shaggy head. “Chee-rist! But we’d have to rape her, Tyle.”

“What’s wrong with that?” Capott laughed raucously. “I understand she rapes real easy. And they say she’d do anything for money. We’ll have more than enough to buy that high-faluting whore tonight.”

In the cool blue evening three riders splashed across a ford in the Rio Grande and climbed the street toward the main plaza of Laredo, stopping and stepping down in front of the Paradise Saloon. Rusty Bouchard peeped over the batwings but Capott and Jeeter were not in view. Quinn, being unknown to the outlaws, went in to make enquiries, while Rusty and Fox Edley waited on either side of the entrance, hands on pistols.

Quinn came out, spreading his palms. “Nobody in there knows a thing about ’em. I got to report in now. Much obliged, boys, for the company and drinks.” He mounted and loped off toward Border Patrol headquarters.

Bouchard and Edley climbed back into the leather

and started for the livery stable. A woman was waiting in the shadows near the archway. She said, "The men you want are at the Queen's Corral." They stared at her in astonishment, stricken by her unusual beauty.

"How would you know what men we want?" Bouchard asked roughly.

She smiled coolly. "Capott and Jeeter."

"Who the hell are you?" Bouchard demanded, even though he'd already guessed her identity.

"I'm Jean Tremblay, and your friends in Mexico are safe. Or were when I last saw them. They should reach here before long now."

"Thank you, ma'am," Fox Edley said politely, trying to alleviate Bouchard's harshness.

"You aiming to save Muldoon's life again?" Bouchard rasped.

"Perhaps I am," Jean said evenly. "Regardless of that, I thought you'd want Capott and Jeeter."

"We do. And we're indebted to you, ma'am." Bouchard lifted his hat and bowed from the saddle. "Forgive my bad manners."

Jean Tremblay laughed. "It's quite all right. I'm accustomed to ill-mannered men."

They wheeled their mounts away and took the street lined with red-lighted houses. "Holy smokes!" Fox Edley said boyishly. "No wonder Lash and Milt went overboard. That's a lotta woman, Red Bush."

"In more ways than one."

"The Queen ain't going to like having her place shot up."

"That's too bad," Bouchard said, squirting tobacco juice through his red whiskers. "When we get inside I'll take the bar, you take the parlor."

In the plush gaudy interior under huge crystal chandeliers, Bouchard bowlegged it to the bar on the right and ordered a drink, while Edley sauntered into the darker parlor at the left and sat down on a pillowed

couch between two girls in long shimmery dresses. The perfumed atmosphere and the proximity of the women made Fox feel giddy and uncomfortable. He was usually drunk when he entered these fancy houses.

A few minutes later Tyler Capott and his partner, a vivacious redhead, appeared at the head of the stairway which descended between the two large rooms. The woman glistened in a gown of silver satin.

The Queen came to an imperial halt in front of Edley. "You spending money, cowboy, or just here to admire the scenery?"

"Gimme time, ma'am," Edley drawled. "I'm a bashful boy." He was watching Capott over the madame's fleshy bare shoulder.

Capott had sighted Bouchard and was coming slowly down the stairs, his left arm holding the girl securely in front of him. Bouchard saw him in the backbar mirror but did not stir, seemingly intent on his drink.

Reaching the main floor, the girl still held before him like a bright shield, Capott turned to his left and forced her forward toward the bar. "All right, Red," he said hoarsely. "Turn around and take it like a man." Capott had a gun in his right hand now, thrust forward beside the girl's slender satin waist. Bouchard stayed motionless, oblivious.

Fox Edley came erect in one lithe swift motion, left arm pushing the Queen aside, right hand lifting his .44 from the sheath. "Get outa line and take cover," he whispered to the madame, and then raised his voice: "Better look this way, Cappy." The women scattered and cowered behind furniture, in back of the Fox.

Capott released his girl and spun, his gun flaming, and Edley felt the hot whiplash of passing lead, as he held firm and squeezed the trigger. The Colt leaped in his hand, and Tyler Capott broke in the middle, his second shot blaring into the carpet. Edley fired once



more, and Capott stiffened upright, reeled backward and landed flat on his shoulder blades, the pistol skidding from his grip. Fox knew he was down to stay.

Screams rent and tore the air, and Edley yelled: "We're Rangers. He's an outlaw. There's another upstairs."

Rusty Bouchard had swiveled from the bar and broken into a run, hurdling Capott's slack body and bounding up the stairs, three at a time. As he reached the top, a door at the end of the corridor opened, and Monk Jeeter stood there with a wildly struggling girl clamped in front of him. His pistol jetted from under the woman's arm, the bullet tearing the wall and showering Bouchard with shards of plaster.

The writhing girl slammed an elbow into Jeeter's groin, and he howled in pain, hurled her forward, and sprang back inside the room, Rusty's shot splintering the door as it banged shut. Racing instantly ahead, Bouchard twisted his left shoulder and crashed into, and through, the door, catapulting into the room with his gun blazing. Jeeter, half-dressed, was at the window, when the slugs ripped into him. The glass shattered as Jeeter fell across the sill and lay hunched inertly, head and shoulders outside, thin rump and legs sprawled inside.

Making certain the man was dead, Bouchard caught up the legs and heaved the body out into the night. One corpse in this palace of pleasure was enough, he figured.

Reloading his .44, Rusty Bouchard walked along the hallway and down the broad staircase into a bedlam of shrieking, sobbing and fainting women, whom Fox Edley was striving in vain to soothe, comfort and silence.

"I'm sorry, Your Highness," said Bouchard to the stony-faced Queen. "But them men had to die. They

was from the Mex army that's marching against Laredo. The state of Texas will pay all damages."

Lifting the broken bloody hulk of Tyler Capott between them, Bouchard and Edley carried it out the front door, the women watching in horror.

"You took a helluva chance, Rusty, waiting so long at that bar," Edley murmured, as they hoisted Capott's body across a saddle, and went to pick up Jeeter, sprawled scrawnily below the broken second-floor window.

"I could see him in the mirror. Knew he wanted me to turn and face him. Cappy had his pride, and liked to gloat a mite. Figured you wouldn't let him shoot me in the back, Fox." They draped Jeeter over the back of the other bronc, and took the horses on lead.

"You went up them stairs like a rocket," Edley chuckled. "Never saw you move so fast, Red Bush."

"I can go when I have to," Bouchard said peevishly.

"Wonder where that Tremblay wench is."

"I wonder why she's so goddamn anxious to protect Senator Muldoon."

"Jeez, I hope Lash and the boys get in tonight." They were leading the horses toward Ranger headquarters, with people gaping at them from sidewalks and arcades.

"So do I." The fountain in the central plaza flowed like cool music.

Fox Edley flicked a match with his thumbnail and lit a thin cigar. "Cactus Bill can't chew us out too much, we bring in these two bastards."

Bouchard snorted and gnawed at a plug of tomacco. "That won't keep him from eating our ears off, Foxcroft."

“Well, we done our duty,” Edley said, with a crooked grin.

“And we’ll get our reward in heaven—or maybe hell,” Bouchard said.

## FIFTEEN

### *Burden of Command*

The command post had been set up in an old adobe-brick farmhouse, lighted with hanging lanterns. Vito Pereda lolled in a canvas camp-chair and ate daintily from a dish of pears and peaches, while an orderly cleaned and polished his already glossy boots. Lieutenant Sanchez stood at rigid attention before an empty desk. Greer Gaffney paced about the earthen floor, snapping a heavy braided quirt, his shave head shining in the erratic light, his face bleak and ugly, a dead cigar in his teeth.

"I'll never by jeezus understand it," Gaffney repeated. "You had a full company of cavalry with six men bottled up in a dead-end canyon, and you let 'em get away after losing about thirty percent of your command. Impossible, Sanchez, but you managed to accomplish it."

"Sir, we killed two of them. We—"

Gaffney barked in laughter. "Big goddamn deal. You lost thirty-five men, and you killed *two* of 'em. You oughta get decorated for that, Sanchez. Decorated with lead from a firing squad. I'd shoot you myself, if we hadn't taken so many casualties already."

"Sir, I told you it wasn't a dead end. There was—"

"How come, for chrisake, they found a pass out and you couldn't?"

"Somebody got in there the back way to save them,

sir," Sanchez said plaintively. "They didn't know about that secret passage."

Gaffney laughed again. "Somebody with wings, Sanchez? Angels from up above, huh? You been eating opium or guzzling pulque or flogging your dummy, man?"

"No, sir."

"Get out, beat it! Go fall on your goddamn sword or bite down on a gun muzzle or dive into the nearest latrine. It don't matter much anyway. The army's going to mutiny. They won't attack until they get paid, and I haven't got a christly *peso* to pay 'em. So this brilliant campaign will end without us firing a single frigging shot at Laredo. Dismissed, Sanchez. Go and get lost, you hopeless sonofabitch!"

Lieutenant Sanchez saluted, about-faced, and marched out through the ragged crumbling doorway, ramrod-stiff.

Gaffney regarded Pereda with supreme disgust. "If the world was ending in five minutes, you'd get your goddamn boots shined, wouldn't you?"

"Control yourself, General," said Pereda calmly, his Negroid features impassive. "You'll burst a blood vessel or have a stroke."

"General! That's the biggest laugh of all." Gaffney continued pacing in his dirty faded army blouse and filthy yellow-striped pants, seeing the final vestige of his dream of glory seeping down the drain. He had counted on carving a niche for himself in military history, and it had come to this abject humiliating conclusion.

"We could take one man from every platoon and shoot him," Pereda suggested.

"We could? You try it, Vito, and see how long *you* live! We've had enough casualties, as it is, without killing our own troops. O Jesus, I should've known this half-assed rabble would never amount to anything.

But I thought that unholy bitch of mine would keep the money coming, and now I haven't even got her, never mind the *dinero*."

"She may yet come through with the funds, Greer," said Pereda, with his unfailing optimism.

"Naw, she's run off with that sonofabitch Fogarty, who's supposed to be my friend. I'll bet my right nut that they got those Rangers outa Crooked Knife Canyon. The slut must burn for that bastard Lashtrow. Twice now she's saved him and his outfit, when we had 'em cold and dead."

"The tide can still turn," Pereda declared, with a cheeriness that set Gaffney's strong horse-teeth to grinding the mangled butt of his cold cigar. "We will yet prevail, comrade."

"You tell the troops that tomorrow at reveille." Gaffney eyed his small dapper associate with loathing, and strangled the impulse to draw and shoot that new scarlet tunic to bloody shreds. "The same time you tell 'em there's no payroll money. They'll cut off your *cojones*, just for a starter."

"My people aren't crying for pay," Pereda said. "It's those gringo renegades of yours that are mad for money."

"I can't really blame them. When a man soldiers, he wants to get paid for it. Nobody works for nothing, Vito."

"My people are still loyal to me," Pereda stated proudly.

"All right, take your goddamn *peons* and attack Laredo then," Gaffney snarled. "You won't even get near the river."

"With artillery support I would try it."

"The artillery men won't fire a shell until they see some greenbacks."

Pereda sneered. "Greed! All *Americanos* are greedy. It is the curse of the country."

Gaffney spat out his cigar stub, swigged from a whiskey bottle, and tore off a huge chew of tobacco. "Balls on this. Arguing all night won't meet the goddamn payroll." *I should have taken a picked crew and robbed some Texas banks, he thought. Instead of waiting for that whore of a Jean to bring us the funds. This whole expedition has been screwed up since the start. One thing after another's gone wrong; nothing has gone right. I should have pulled out long ago. Foolish to stay in a game, when you lack the cards. Stubborn and stupid. Always been too stubborn for my own good.*

*But with the right troops and solid financial backing, I could've shown the bastards something, left my mark on world history. General Crook himself, up in Lar-amie, said I had military genius, and that great old Injun fighter didn't pass out many compliments. I had it, still have it, but you got to command the right men, materials and finances in order to function effectively. Rather have one well-armed and -trained company than this ragtag drag-assed mob we got here. Well, if nothing comes in tonight, we might as well pack up and pull out tomorrow. I had visions of shells bursting in Laredo, a cavalry charge sweeping the river and outer works, and me and Vito leading a triumphal march into the main plaza, but that dream's gone the way all my dreams went, dissolved into nothing. Down the goddam sewer.*

*Aw, the hell with it. I'll leave this country, ship out somewhere abroad, find a war and join up, draw combat wages and let somebody else carry the burden of command. Better to be just a field officer anyway. Do your job, run your risks, and let the upper echelon fret and sweat under the big responsibilities. All that brass and braid never meant much to me. Who needs it? I'm just a dog soldier, at heart.*

*But I would like to get a crack at that Lashtraw*

*before I go. Head on, man-to-man, and I'll put that sonofabitch under. Yeah, that's one thing I got to do, for sure. Kill the great Lashtrow.*

*It started going bad when that Galveston deal blew up in our teeth, and Lashtrow was to blame for it. Lost some of my best men there; then Burke Coram and Sid Servoss went; now Fogarty and Capott and Jeeter are gone. Don't leave me much except half-assed Mexicans and burnt-out whites from all over the map. The real good ones are dead or missing.*

Greer Gaffney sat down on an ammunition crate behind his crude improvised desk, and took another pull at the bottle. He wondered where Jean Tremblay was, and who she was sleeping with tonight. Probably that goddamned Lashtrow . . . . He felt like getting drunk, but it was no fun alone. That was another drawback to holding command: nobody to drink with. Nobody to talk with, except the crazy Pereda in his fancy uniforms, who ought to be in a padded cell instead of an army headquarters.

"Gotta get some air." Gaffney rose and strode out the door. He couldn't endure Pereda's perfumed presence another minute. Two sentries snapped to attention and saluted. "At ease, men," Gaffney said, and walked away from camp, the night air soft and feathery on his fevered face.

He passed through growths of tarragon and gilia to reach the edge of the bluff, and gazed out over the misted Rio Grande to the hazy glow of the two river towns. A half-moon hung tilted in the star-dazzled heavens. Horned owls hooted weirdly and night-hawks cried out as they hunted the woodlands. From a distance wolves howled and coyotes yapped; Gaffney felt a kinship with them. Fireflies streaked the air in greenish tracers of light, winking on and off. *Laredo could have been mine, two days from now*, he thought, an acid taste filling his mouth.



At the sound of movement behind him, Gaffney drew and whirled with smooth speed. He practiced his draw every day without fail.

"Don't shoot, General! You're almighty quick."

"Who the hell's there?"

"Sergeant Cletis O'Hara, sir." A thin lanky shape came from the shadows. "Don't mean to be pushy, but I'd like a few words with you, sir."

"Forget the general and sir. This army's just about disbanded."

"You can't pay off tomorrow then?"

"No chance. What you want, O'Hara?"

"Well, me and my men been talking." O'Hara had a bony triangular face, mean-eyed and taut-lipped in the vague light. "Seems a bleeding shame to come this far and not strike a blow. I got a fine squad with many talents."

"So?" Gaffney swished his quirt through bunch grass.

"I was going to request permission to take a small raiding party into Laredo."

"For what purpose?"

O'Hara's mouth smiled, but not his eyes. "Their minds on defense, they won't be paying much attention to that big bank there. I got some seasoned bank robbers in my squad. They tell me the Laredo bank's an easy mark."

Gaffney's brooding eyes and craggy face showed sudden interest, but he said nothing. His mind was already formulating strategy and visualizing results. Just so the whole prolonged venture wouldn't be a total goddamn loss. No chair-borne officer by nature, Greer had been chafing for action all summer.

"The town's a stewing mass of disorder and confusion," Cletis O'Hara continued. "We could infiltrate, hit the bank and get out, before they knew what struck 'em. How does it sound, General?"

Greer Gaffney grinned. "It has possibilities, Sergeant."

"Would you care to meet my squad and discuss it further?"

Gaffney shrugged powerful shoulders. "I got nothing better to do, at the moment. Bring them to headquarters. I'll get rid of Pereda, and we'll have a council of war." Gaffney felt like a man coming back to life, suddenly and miraculously.

"If you could spare a bottle or two, it might make the boys feel more easy and comfortable." Cletis O'Hara was a sly one, slick and sharp as a ferret, Greer realized.

"There's plenty of booze, don't worry," Gaffney assured him. "Pereda don't drink a drop. I been wanting somebody to drink with. It's poor sport, drinking by yourself."

"That I know full well," declared O'Hara, his narrow eyes now matching the smile on his tight lips. "I'll have my boys at the command post in about fifteen minutes, if that's agreeable to you."

Gaffney nodded his naked brutal head. "I'll inform the sentries and send Pereda to bed."

Cletis O'Hara saluted and was gone, as quickly as he had appeared. Retracing his own steps, Greer Gaffney thought: *Now why in hell didn't I think of that myself, for chrisake?*

O'Hara's squad was all hard-core Irish, tough and thirsty, cocky and swaggering. Cletis O'Hara himself was a roving soldier-of-fortune. Haggerty and Finnegan were ex-cops; Doyle and Noonan, bank robbers. McTigue and Riley had served in the army; Keefe and Brannon were cowboys. McGee had been a professional fighter, Casey a barkeeper, Murphy a priest. The former barrister was Corporal Cassidy.

Greer Gaffney sized them up as they drank and talked in the command post, and liked what he saw

and heard. Fortune had delivered into his hands this compact steel-cased unit, with which he could strike at the enemy. Taking a bank wasn't exactly a conquest of Texas, but it was, by God, *something*, when it had appeared that Gaffney would come up with nothing at all.

"It may not be a knockout," said McGee of the flattened nose and cauliflower ears, "but we'll take home a purse of some kind, bejazzus!"

"A slice off the loaf is better than no bread whatever," Father Murphy agreed solemnly, tipping up the bottle once again.

Doyle and Noonan had sneaked into Laredo to study the bank and its surroundings, and Cassidy had neatly charted the layout, exterior and interior. With the chart laid out on the plank desk, Gaffney figured the placement and duties of the fourteen men, including himself. He was happier than he had been in months, as he considered suggestions from O'Hara, Cassidy and the two holdup men, and worked out the details.

Greer Gaffney could visualize a new career for himself, leading this close-knit group of fighting men to strike one Texas bank after another. Somewhere along the way he was bound to run into Lashtrow and settle that score, once and for all. He pictured Lashtrow riddled by his gunfire, beaten down to squirm, grovel and die in the dirt at his feet.

A couple of spies arrived from Laredo, and Gaffney interrupted the meeting to hear their reports in a side room. The U.S. Army was still missing from the scene, but the town swarmed with Rangers, Border Patrol men, U.S. Marshals and other law officers. Tyler Capott and Monk Jeeter had been shot to death in the Queen's Corral, premier whorehouse, by Rangers Bouchard and Edley . . . . Jean Tremblay was staying at the Border House, and rumor had it that she might have set up the killings.

"That goddamn woman's got a lot to answer for," Gaffney growled.

"So far as we know," one of the agents added, "Lashtrow's party hasn't got back from Mexico yet, but they're expected anytime now."

Gaffney gave them a jug of tequila, "Until you're better paid, boys," and went back into session with the Irishmen. Doyle and Noonan had employed a variety of methods in cracking banks, and it was tentatively decided that the best chance here was to break in at night and blow the vault and safes. They were experts in the use of explosives, and dynamite was available in quantity.

"Between midnight and morning," Noonan said. "Around three o'clock is prob'ly the best time. Any all-night guards posted will be watching the river on the west, and the bank's east of the plaza. After the break, I'd say scatter eastward and meet in San Antonio."

Gaffney nodded. "They'll look for us to cross back into Mexico. And there are some good banks to hit in San Antonio." He was thinking: *If I get time I'll pay Jean Tremblay a visit and strangle the double-crossing bitch. She and Lashtrow are tops on my list.*

"We'll perfect the plans and gather the materials tomorrow," Gaffney said. "And move out tomorrow night. It's our only chance to salvage anything outa this screwed-up deal."

"Yeah, the army's breaking up fast," Cletis O'Hara said. "Hundreds have deserted already, you know."

## SIXTEEN

### *Homecoming*

Since Crooked Knife Canyon, it had been slow tortuous going for Lashtrow and his comrades. They'd been forced to dodge, outrun and fight off enemy patrols; to hide by day and travel at night. Horses went lame and rations dwindled to a bare minimum. They managed to replenish their water supply, and scavenge a little grub here and there.

There had been no serious casualties, since the loss of Sid Servoss and Nils Larssen, but Fogarty had been nicked in the arm, Rammel on the hip, and Milt Travers' thigh was painfully creased. In their dirty tattered clothes and bloodied bandages, they resembled the battered survivors of a desperate last stand. Five weary men on jaded horses, blackened by the sun, gunsmoke and alkali dust, drawn to the bone. Fogarty fitted in well. Arch Loomis was still bitter and morose over the death of his long-time shipmate Larssen, and they all missed the quiet friendly Sid Servoss. When two men like that went under, it left a gaping emptiness.

"One of the finest men I ever rode with, Sid was," Fogarty said, with Lash and Travers in full concurrence. Rammel and Loomis hadn't known Sid that well, but they had liked him instantly. And everyone had been fond of the solid ironic Swede, of course, with his blunt features and straw-colored hair.

Lashtrow felt responsible, as he always did for losses in combat. Every man who fell at his side eroded

another part of himself, and sometimes Lash felt eaten away to a skeleton. It wasn't worth it. There must be different and better ways of living, without being forever involved in death. He wanted out, yet he knew there was no escape for him. He was destined to go on riding and fighting, until his bullet finally found him. And what did it all amount to, in the end? A dream within a dream world, shadows that came and went in no meaningful pattern, a career filled with conflict, strife and killing, a battle that never ended until the eternal darkness closed in. A mad reckless race toward oblivion.

Now, in the night, they were at last nearing the Rio Grande and Texas, and Lashtrow strove to throw off his morbid mood and keen his senses to reality.

From a stony ridge south and west of Nuevo Laredo, they saw the vast spread of the Mexican army bivouac, dotted by dying campfires, within striking distance of Laredo but strangely somnolent, somehow almost harmless looking under a half-moon and the myriad stars. As they watched, groups of horsemen broke away from the encampment and straggled westward in retreat, deserters drifting off with no pretense of military order, a few hooded wagons lurching after them.

"They're busting up," Lashtrow said, in wonder. "Going home without firing a shot. It's a dead army. What in hell could have happened?"

"Damned if I know," Milt Travers murmured. "But it's a welcome sight."

"They just run out of money," Fogarty said. "Those men haven't been paid in weeks or months. I could see it coming the last time I was in camp. They were ready to mutiny then. Now they've done it."

"Beautiful!" said Rammel, patting his wounded hip. "The war's over before it began. That's my kinda war, boys."

"Let's slip in there and shoot a few dozen of the sonsabitches," Arch Loomis said, teeth bared in his thin grimed face, curly head thrusting.

Fogarty laughed and cuffed Loomis's shoulder. "The odds are still a bit heavy, Arch."

"We might get Gaffney and Pereda," insisted Loomis.

"They're probably gone already," Travers said. "We don't need to hit them now, Arch. They're beaten, finished."

Lashtrow was surveying the scene with his field-glasses. *Thank God!* he thought, and then started in surprise. A squad-sized detachment was moving *east* toward the river, and the big rider at the point looked like General Greer Gaffney himself. *Gaffney's lost his army*, Lash concluded. *But he's going to try something on his own, and there's no telling what the big bastard is up to. Probably packing in dynamite to blow up as much of Laredo as possible.* The detail had three pack-horses on lead, bristling with extra rifles and no doubt loaded with something infinitely more dangerous and powerful. The war hadn't quite ended, as yet.

"There's one crew heading for the Rio Grande and Laredo," said Lash. "Twelve, fourteen riders and three packhorses. Looks like Gaffney's leading the party. The army may quit, but Gaffney won't." There was something like admiration in Lash's tone, grudging but evident. "The crazy sonofabith."

"I thought Pereda was the crazy one," Rammel drawled.

"Gaffney's crazy in a different way," Fogarty said soberly.

"We better get across the river," Lashtrow said. "They'll swing a wide circle to come in from the east. We oughta make it well ahead of 'em."

"Odds on they'll hit the bank," Fogarty said, massaging his hurt left arm. "I know Greer pretty well.

He's a bastard, but a real tough bastard. It's just like him to charge Laredo with one squad. He's a fighter."

"Let's go, boys," Lashtrow said, and they lined out for the Rio Grande and the home soil of Texas.

Racking along on their tired horses toward the mist-hazed, tree-lined river, Lash thought: *The war isn't over as long as Greer Gaffney's alive. There won't be any large-scale battle, no bombardment or siege, but there will be trouble and menace, bloodshed and death, until Gaffney goes down to stay. And I've always felt I had a personal obligation to cut down that big shave-headed sonofabitch. I want him myself, and I've got an idea Gaffney feels that same way about me.*

So, the time was coming in the small early morning hours, and Lashtrow felt the adrenalin rise and flow as he keyed himself for another showdown. *Pray God no more Mex patrols that don't know yet their cause is lost, their campaign ended,* Lash hoped, as the five riders skirted Nuevo Laredo and made for the South Ford. The enemy invaders would have crossed further downstream by now, and be arcing around to approach Laredo from the eastern side. They were well ahead of the Rangers. There was no time to be wasted.

Sixgun in hand, Lashtrow led them through the screen of willows, salt cedars and cottonwoods to the riverside. The Rio Grande rippled silvery over the shoals, with spray spouting white as the horses splashed toward the Texas shore. They were challenged by American outguards on the other side, and there were uncomfortable moments until someone recognized them.

"Hey, hold your fire! It's Lash and Trav and Ram, for chrisake! Come on in, boys." It was Jordan's clear young voice, and Lashtrow sighed in relief.

Jordan was moved close to tears, as he greeted them: "Welcome home! Jesus! I never expected to see your



ugly faces again. You're to report to headquarters at once, Lash."

"You come with us, Jord, and bring us up to date," Lashtrow said. "Did you know the Mexican army was breaking up?"

"We heard reports, but hardly dared to believe them."

"What's new here?" They angled upward toward the dim scattered lights of sleeping Laredo, happy to be back on home terrain at last.

"Captain McKenna's in charge now," Jordan said. "Red Bush and the Fox killed Capott and Jeeter in the Queen's Corral. Figure they was here to make another play for Senator Muldoon."

"Maybe that's who Gaffney is after, instead of the bank," Lash mused.

"Joan Tremblay tipped Bouchard and Edley. She's staying at the Border House, and Henry DeWitt's registered there, too."

Lashtrow shook his head. "That woman's everywhere. But what the hell is Henry doing here?"

"He tried to get McKenna to send a rescue force into Mexico after you boys," Jordan said. "Cactus Bill said you deserved whatever happened to you, for making a wild-assed, five-man invasion on your own."

Lashtrow grinned. "Sounds like old Cactus. Come on, we've gotta cover Muldoon's house and the bank, too. Enemy detail coming in from the east."

"Ain't you going to report in first?" Jordan looked alarmed.

"Haven't got time." Lashtrow lifted his sorrel into a trot, and the others booted their brons forward. "They may be at Muldoon's already. Gaffney must have something personal against the Senator."

They clopped up a sloping street toward the plaza, meeting one mounted patrol and seeing sentries posted

at some intersections, but at 2:40 A.M. most of Laredo was dark and silent in slumber. Jordan dropped back to shake hands with his partner Rammel, and exchange fond and profane greetings, and Ram introduced him to Fogarty, told him Larssen and Servoss were dead.

They were six men now, riding to meet a force more than twice their number and likely armed with dynamite.

In his front corner room upstairs in the Border House, Henry DeWitt was wide awake and fully dressed, alternating between pacing the floor and slumping in an easy chair, staring at the tall glass in his pudgy manicured hand.

He had heard about the shooting in the Queen's Corral, and he marveled anew at the gun skills of the Rangers. Not only Lashtrow, who was considered the greatest shootist, but Red Bouchard and Fox Edley, Milt Travers and Rammel, were top hands with a Colt .44, certainly among the best in the annals of the West. It was amazing for one relatively small organization to have so many superior gunfighters. No wonder Ned Buntline was frustrated at being so far denied the rights to publish books about Lashtrow and the rest. Captain Bill McKenna had secured a court order prohibiting any such projects by the number-one chronicler of the Wild West, who had already made world-famous such characters as Buffalo Bill Cody, Jesse and Frank James, Wild Bill Hickok, Wyatt Earp, the Daltons, Ben and Bill Thompson, Bear River Tom Smith, Billy the Kid Bonney, and Pat Garrett. Not to forget "Yellow Hair," George Armstrong Custer.

Henry DeWitt had once been a man of power, authority and influence, a figure of national prominence, and he had never resigned himself to his present obscurity. All he had left was wealth, and he'd been

wasting that outrageously in these latter years, throwing it away on bad investments and lost causes. It made him physically ill to contemplate his wastrel ways. He sought in vain for a means of reestablishing his prestige on a nationwide basis, regaining the fame and honor he had once enjoyed in abundance. He refused to admit the glory days were gone forever.

His ears burned now as he recalled how he had stooped low enough to curry favor with Ned Buntline, hosting, wining and dining the dime-novel author in a most extravagant manner, in the desperate hope that Ned would do a book on him.

Elmo Z. C. Judson, the true name of the writer, had shaken his shaggy black head and pawed his thick mustache sadly. "You're a rare fine gentleman, Henry. But as far as the public is concerned, you're dead and forgotten."

Henry DeWitt had taken it with good grace, on the surface, while inside he yearned fiercely for the strength to smash a champagne magnum across those broad dissolute features.

Henry knew now that Jean Tremblay was in a room at the rear end of the corridor, and he puzzled once more over the fantastic comings and goings of this strange lovely woman. In his aloneness, he was tempted to pay her a visit, yet he shrank from facing those scornful smoky gray eyes.

Henry DeWitt had no desire for her, or any other woman, but she intrigued him immensely. In younger days, he had delighted in appearing in public with beautiful ladies, and with his charm and wit there'd been no dearth of them. He had been one of the most eligible and popular bachelors in Washington society, and his social calendar was always filled to the utmost. Ah, the sparkling glamour of those lost times, the scented beauty, exquisite jewels, fine liqueurs, gay music and laughter, the girls shining like tulips in rich

bright gowns . . . . He drank and his eyes teared at the memories, his throat filled with pain.

Now he sat alone, unknown and unwanted, drinking by himself in a bare room in a frontier hotel, an elegantly tailored corpse going through the mundane motions of living, cold and hollow and sick inside. He longed for the presence of Lashtrow, wanting to bask again in the reflected life, warmth and strength of the big easygoing man. Lash lighted up everything.

Henry's mind turned to Jean Tremblay, abruptly filled with unaccountable hatred and loathing, as he thought of all the men she had given her luscious body to: Sid Servoss . . . that brute of a Gaffney . . . Lashtrow . . . Fogarty . . . Travers . . . and a legion of others. He knew far more of her history than he had ever revealed. Henry had informants everywhere, one item he still possessed, along with his money.

It was rumored that Jean Tremblay had told Bouchard and Edley where to find Capott and Jeeter, and he didn't question the truth of it. That was the second time she had saved Muldoon's life, and he wondered why. So far as Henry knew, she had never been intimate, or even acquainted with the old Senator. Sudden comprehension dawned on him, and Henry rose and refilled his glass with cognac.

That was it, of course, as plain as could be. He should have seen it before, back when Kansas and Burke Coram died in the Muldoon mansion. It was obvious enough, God knows. How could he have been so blind and stupid?

Well, it gave him a course of action, an objective, at least. Two very definite objectives, in fact. And that was what he needed. Something to sharpen and point his empty existence. That was quite enough.

Hearing horsemen in the street below, Henry DeWitt went to the open window and peered down. There was light enough from the dim corner lamps to see the

riders clearly, and he identified them: Lashtrow and Travers in front, followed by Rammel and young Jordan, with Fogarty and Loomis behind. So Fogarty has switched sides, he thought. Like Sid Servoss did. It must be true that the Mexican army was disintegrating rapidly. Pereda and Gaffney were doomed to ignominious failure. Something else he should have foreseen long ago. Must be getting senile, for godsake.

But there was purpose and controlled haste in the attitude of the passing riders. They were going to meet some kind of opposition or threat. It would be like Greer Gaffney to lash out in one final defiant stroke, hopeless as it might be. Well, that was Ranger business. They could handle it, no doubt. He had supreme faith in Lashtrow, Travers and Rammel.

Meanwhile, Henry DeWitt had two missions of his own.

He went to his rich leather valise and removed a short-barreled Smith & Wesson .38 in a light holster. With casual familiarity he pulled out the pistol, checked the loads and action, spun the cylinder, re-sheathed the weapon and clipped it onto the belt at his portly waistline. Just doing that made him feel more of a man. His draped suitcoat concealed the gun.

Returning to the dresser, Henry DeWitt poured himself another long drink of brandy and raised the glass in a silent toast. His plump pink face was smiling now, the lines of strain eased and smoothed. He sank into the horsehide chair to savor his drink, and glanced at his jeweled gold watch. It read 2:52 A.M.

But there was no particular hurry. The brandy tasted much better now.

Jean Tremblay had given up trying to sleep in her room at the back of the Border House, and was striving to make some sort of sense, order and meaning out

of the crazy-quilt patchwork of her life. She knew it was useless. Her existence was a chaos, a turbulent tangled mess. She did things without knowing why, totally devoid of rhyme or reason. Her motives were a mystery to herself. She must be insane; there was no other explanation. And she had finally sickened of herself and everything else.

Tonight she had sent two more men to their death—Tyler Capott and Monk Jeeter. Perhaps they deserved to die, but what gave her the right to bring about their execution? Earlier she had caused the deaths of Kansas and Burke Coram, and God only knows how many others. She had even tried to bring death to Lashtrow, Travers, Servoss, three men she had loved, in her own peculiar way. True, she had later saved them, except for Sid Servoss, but the fact remained that she had tried to get them killed. What kind of a twisted neurotic sex-mad bitch was she, anyway? There was no hope, no salvation for her. She was a lost damned soul, an evil creature who should be obliterated, a witch who merited burning at the stake.

Jean swung her long legs around and sat on the edge of the bed, reaching for the whiskey bottle on the stand and splashing a lethal drink into the tall glass. Perhaps she could drink herself to sleep, knock herself out, escape this tortured thinking and probing and wondering. If she had a man, she could sleep. For an instant she was impelled to go out and find a man, any man, and bring him back to her bed. Then she realized it must be nearly three o'clock in the morning, and such an act was too bizarre, even for her. The liquor alone would have to do it. Maybe she could even drink herself to death here, the ultimate solution. She had no excuse or purpose for living. The world, rotten as it was, would be a little better without her.

The whiskey might as well have been water. It

brought no surcease. Jean Tremblay writhed in a torment that was mental and spiritual as well as physical. She wept like a forlorn child, and raved like a maniac. She drank some more and fell back on the bed, moaning: "O God, help me, help me, God! Somebody help me. I'm alone, all alone. I need help, can't you see? . . . There must be someone, something, somewhere. Don't leave me like this. Sweet Jesus, come and help me, forgive me, please forgive me . . . ."

She had known brute bastards like Gaffney, but she had also known good men, as fine as any woman could want, Sid Servoss and Lashtrow and Milt Travers, even Fogarty . . . . Why couldn't she have clung to one of the good ones, given her love, made a full life, stayed straight and clean and honest? What had cursed her from childhood, filled her blood with evil, lust and poison? . . . "O Christ on the cross, let me die. If You won't help me, let me die."

Jean rolled and turned and twisted, flung herself about in mortal agony, cursed and prayed and pleaded. She reared up and gulped more whiskey, yearning for unconsciousness, but it would not come. There was no relief anywhere. She was left isolated in her anguish, paying for her sins, suffering for all the hearts and lives she had broken, the spoilage she had spilled broadside on the earth.

"O God in heaven, enough, enough!" she cried. "Spare me, save me, lift me out of this hellish horror, show me some mercy. Nobody should have to endure this, Jesus, not even me."

She bounded from the bed, poured and downed another glassful, and went rocking and reeling about the room in the faint flickering lamplight, clawing at the blank walls like a caged animal, finally collapsing back

on the snarled sheets, panting and sweating. It was too much, too much for anyone to bear.

When Jean heard somebody at the door, she knew death was there, and she welcomed it.



## SEVENTEEN

### *The Insurgents*

It was just after three o'clock in the morning, when Greer Gaffney led his raiders past the brick mansion of Senator Muldoon into the upper eastern levels of Laredo, and started the descent toward the central plaza. The downhill street was unlighted and still between rows of trees and the empty adobe and frame houses of evacuees. The American patrols and guard posts were concentrated down along the Rio Grande, as anticipated. The insurgents should reach the bank without opposition.

A black-and-white spotted dog, scarcely more than a puppy, skittered in front of them and frisked about, setting up a shrill insistent barking. Gaffney yanked his saber from the scabbard and leaned out and down for a slashing stroke that cut the small animal in half.

Lashtraw, accompanied by Rammel and Loomis, were climbing toward the Muldoon house, having left Travers, Fogarty and Jordan behind at the bank. Hearing the incoming riders in the next street to the left, Lash realized that the Senator was not their first target. Dismounting, carbines in hand, Lash led Ram and Arch between houses and sheds and across backyards toward the adjacent thoroughfare. Most of the homes in this area had been deserted by the evacuation of citizens, a blessing in these circumstances.

The dog's barking quickened their steps, and sudden rifle fire spurted and crashed at them, in the space

between two dwellings. Crouched low under the sizzling stream of bullets, the three Rangers returned the fire swiftly, scattering the enemy column into a confused milling and pitching. Lashtrow smashed the nearest side window in the adobe at their left, and plunged through it with Rammel and Loomis diving after him, as lead sparked and screamed off the wall at their heels.

By the time the Rangers reached the front of the house, the enemy had withdrawn to shelter across the street, splitting up to occupy three homes there, and torrents of gunfire lashed and crisscrossed back and forth, splintering glass and wood, shrieking off adobe bricks.

Superior in numbers as they were at the moment, Greer Gaffney knew their position was untenable, for soon they would be surrounded by American forces. Bellowing commands from his broken window, Gaffney called for a retreat, and the invaders scrambled out in back of the houses. Just in time to run into the blasting carbines of Milt Travers, Fogarty and Jordan, who had come racing their horses up from the bank to catch the enemy in a scorching crossfire. Father Murphy and Doyle were first to fall.

Breaking out the front way, Lash and Ram and Arch ran across the street, bent low and weaving as they emptied their carbines. Raiders toppled here and there in the chaos of flame and smoke, and a couple of their broncs dropped thrashing the dirt, as Milt and Foge and Jord closed in from the other side, dodging and zigzagging on foot now with their handguns blazing, sliding from one covering wall to the next.

For a few roaring minutes it was a savage house-to-house street fight, as both sides resorted to pistols after spending their long guns. Gaffney, O'Hara, Cassidy and the rest of the surviving Irishmen were trying to mount their bucking horses and take flight, but a few

more went down under the deadly Ranger shooting before they could break loose. Then they were gone in a wild scattered gallop, firing back as they went, and six bone-tired cordite-gagging Texans were left in command of the reeking back area, strewn with dead or wounded foemen and horses in the smoky dust.

Silence surged back in the night, eerie after the vicious racketing of guns, and the smoke cleared slowly to let the stars shine through. Reinforcements were coming now, but the battle was over. A handful of the enemy had escaped, the unmounted Rangers with Colts emptied being in no condition to launch a pursuit. A pursuit that would have been pointless anyhow, since the dynamite-laden packmules had been left behind, and the threat against the bank and the town was ended.

The unfortunate part was that Greer Gaffney had been one of the renegades who got away.

It occurred to Lashtrow that Gaffney might hit Senator Muldoon on the way out, if he did have a vendetta going there.

Silently Lashtrow slipped away from his comrades and recrossed the street. He found the sorrel, swung into the leather, and rode up the slope in the direction of Muldoon's manor. Lash was weary enough to drop, but he wanted to catch Gaffney and settle the long-awaited score, wind this affair up right. His Winchester and Colts were reloaded, and Lashtrow was ready.

The faint chop of hoofbeats sounded in the distance before him. Lash smiled slowly, took a chew to ease his dry mouth and throat, and booted the sorrel lightly onward up the hill.

But when he reached the brick house there were no lights, no signs of life or movement, no horses outside.

Circling the place, slow and wary, Lashtrow was convinced that Gaffney had not come here at all.

Then he recalled that Jean Tremblay was in the Border House, and Gaffney was daring, reckless and vindictive enough to go there and wreak his vengeance on the girl. Or carry her away with him. Very few men would make such a move, into the heart of a hostile town, but Greer Gaffney was one of them.

Lashtrow kned the sorrel around and back down the grade toward midtown, amazed that the superb horse could still run. "Hate to push you, Soldier," he said, bending into the rush of dark air. "But we can't afford to be late on this one."

Greer Gaffney, clear of the carnage and alone in the night, heard his companions pound uphill toward the eastern outskirts, and turned his buckskin back for the Border House in the main plaza, after reloading all his weapons. They wouldn't look for the insurgent leader to head straight into the center of the enemy stronghold. Gaffney was seething with hatred, fury and the need for revenge, filled with a poisonous venom.

Everything continued to go wrong, foredoomed to failure from the beginning. How could they possibly have known of this raid tonight? Just sheer luck, good on their side, rotten on his. Several times during the conflict, Gaffney had spotted and lined his gun on Lashtrow, but couldn't hit the bastard. Lash always seemed to move a split-second before Gaffney squeezed off. No wonder they said the sonofabitch was bullet-proof. He should have died a dozen times on this campaign, and he was still unhurt.

Gaffney had seen his own men blown down all about him: Haggerty, the cop, and Doyle, the bank robber. Casey, the bartender, and Murphy, the ex-priest. Brannon the cowboy with his chest riddled, McGee the

prize-fighter with his face shot off. He didn't know how many had escaped along with him. Five or six, at the most, he estimated. Another bloody goddamn disaster. It wasn't in the cards for Gaffney to win even a single pot. And so far as he knew, not one Ranger had fallen. It just didn't make sense. The deck was stacked against him, the dice were loaded.

Well, there was a final satisfaction left for Greer, if he could make it undetected to the Border House. He'd kill that whore of a Jean Tremblay with his bare hands, watch the life ooze out of her eyes and face as his steel fingers closed on her lovely delicate throat. That was one triumph he would achieve, come hell or high water. And if he happened to run across Lash-trow, that would be another victory to cherish. The death of those two would compensate for all the defeats he had suffered.

The plaza was nearly empty. The few people he saw were hastening after others who had already swarmed to the scene of the shooting. Nobody noticed Gaffney as he ground-hitched his buckskin in the dark runway beside the hotel, and walked casually in through the front entrance to the lobby.

The night clerk, awakened by the gunfire, fixed bulging spectacled eyes on the huge towering man and blurted: "What happened out there? What in tarnation's going on? Is the Mex army attacking the town?"

"Naw, just a little skirmish, I reckon," Gaffney said. "Rangers caught a few Mex scouts from across the river, I heard. It's all over now."

"Thank the Lord for that. You want a room, mister?"

"No thanks. I have an appointment with Miss Jean Tremblay. What room is she in?"

The clerk looked aghast. "At this hour? I'm afraid, sir, I can't—"

"Just gimme the room number." Gaffney leaned

over the desk, and the little clerk cowered back. "We're old friends, see? She's expecting me."

"Yes, sir!" He ran a trembling finger down the register book. "Number twenty-four, second-floor rear."

"Thank you kindly." Gaffney turned to climb the stairs.

The clerk followed his high frame out of sight, and glanced furtively at the telephone. He wanted to call the law, but he was afraid to touch the phone. That big man might come back down and wring his neck like a chicken's. That Goliath had the odor of blood, gunpowder and death on him.

Gaffney moved down the upstairs corridor, treading lightly for such a giant, his pale eyes glowing in his craggy powder-smeared face, great hands swinging easily near the lowslung guns. This was his moment, this was something he was going to enjoy to the fullest. That bitch of a woman who had crossed him and everyone else so many times. Her satiny throat crushed in his powerful grasp, the smoky gray eyes popping in fear and horror. That would be the ultimate in orgiastic pleasure.

I might rape her first, he thought. That's all she was ever good for. Jesus! but she was great at that. The best he'd ever had, by far.

Gaffney reached the door numbered 24 at the end of the hall, when he heard something behind him. He started to turn, but it was too late.

Henry DeWitt had been reclining in his easy chair, sipping brandy, when the gunfire erupted on the slopes east of the plaza. Lashtrow and his Rangers must have found what they were seeking. Henry pictured the scene, guns blasting and lightning flashes streaking back and forth, and wished he had been born

a man of action instead of intellect. Well, at this late stage in life, he was going to become a man of violence. But there was still plenty of time.

Henry loaded and lighted his meerschaum pipe, and settled back to relish the tobacco flavor, interspersed with nips of cognac. At times the combination exceeded even the finest tasting foods. He felt almost euphoric in his new-found comfort and satisfaction. Somehow, for the first time, he was forgetting the disgrace and shame of the past.

When the shooting slowed, faded and ceased, Henry DeWitt rose to refill both his pipe and glass, and sank once more into the horsehide chair. This one belt and he would start moving. What he had to do was clearly defined in his mind, unclouded by doubt and indecision. His will was set firmly; there would be no deviation. He had become again a man of power and purpose. He held the fate, the lives of two people in his hands, and it made him omnipotent. Henry had drifted aimlessly too long, a helpless chip on the tidal current of fortune. Tonight, or rather this early morning, he would take control and act on his own initiative. He had been a man of peace, but he'd be a killer twice over before sunrise.

If you wanted something significant done, you had to do it yourself.

As Henry prepared to leave the sanctuary of his room, he heard boots on the stairway. He listened intently, but they turned in the opposite direction from his door.

With the .38 in hand, Henry DeWitt stepped quietly out and shut the door behind him, startled and astonished to see the massive shape of Greer Gaffney stalking along the corridor toward the rear of the house. The colossal nerve of the man, coming here after that gunfight. Heading for Jean Tremblay's room, of course, probably bent on killing her. Henry couldn't

let that happen. Strangely unafraid, he paced stealthily after the big man, thumb crooked on the hammer of the Smith & Wesson. He was performing like an idealized figure in a fantasy, without haste or fear or tension, supremely sure of himself.

Gaffney hesitated at Jean's door and started to wheel around. Cold as ice, Henry DeWitt cocked, aimed and pressed the trigger. The pistol jumped in his hand, jetting burnt orange, and the bullet struck solidly, punching Gaffney's bulk forward on jacking legs. The knees folded and the big man fell full length on his face with a jarring thump, dust skirling up from the worn carpet. Gaffney lay there, hunched and still, and Henry let down the hammer and lowered the .38, amazed at how easy it was to kill a man, even a giant like Greer. He watched a crimson pool spread on the floor.

The door opened, revealing Jean's shocked face, and Henry stepped over Gaffney's booted legs and pushed into the room, slamming and locking the door after himself.

"What the hell are *you* doing here?" cried Jean Tremblay.

"I just killed Greer Gaffney."

"*You* killed Gaffney?" Jean laughed a bit hysterically.

"That's right," Henry said evenly. "And now I'm going to kill you."

"You're insane, Henry!" Her smoky gray eyes widened in terror. "You're stark raving mad. Put down that gun, you idiot. You have no reason to shoot me, man." Faced with death, Jean no longer welcomed it.

"All the reason in the world," Henry said calmly. "You're as good as dead now, my beauty. But I'll let you live a few minutes more, while I explain some pertinent things to you."



“Henry! You can’t kill *me*!” She didn’t want to die now; life was sweet.

DeWitt smiled happily. “I can kill you, my dear, with the greatest of ease and pleasure.”

## EIGHTEEN

### *Lashtraw's Turn*

When Lashtraw slid from the saddle in front of the Border House, he was so tired his knees nearly gave way and dropped him into the dust. Recovering his balance, he tossed the reins over the tie-rack and stared around. The rangy buckskin standing in the shadowed runway looked like Gaffney's mount. Lash's second hunch had been correct; Gaffney was in the hotel. "Last hand's coming up, old Pard," he told the sorrel.

Walking toward the gallery, Lashtraw stopped abruptly in his tracks as Greer Gaffney came stumbling splay-legged out the lobby doorway, gun hanging from his right hand. At first Lash thought he was drunk. Then he saw the bloody shirt and realized Gaffney was wounded, hit hard and almost out on his feet. Reeling against an upright post, Gaffney caught it left-handed to hold himself half-erect. His pale wolf eyes stared blankly at the Ranger, without recognition.

"Don't get in my way," Gaffney panted. "Nobody—get in—my way."

"You need a doctor, man."

"Frig a doctor. Just—lemme—alone." Gaffney's ugly face was like a death mask, runneled with sweat, and Lash thought he was dying on his feet. Only the support of the wooden pillar held him up.

"Let me help you."

Gaffney finally identified him. "So—it's you—you bastard. Got to—kill you—goddamn you."

"You're in no condition to fight," Lashtrow said. "Let me get you to a doctor, for chrisake."

"Reach—you sonofabitch," Gaffney gasped out. "Reach—or die."

The pistol seemed too heavy for Greer to lift. Lash made no move to draw. In spite of Gaffney's many crimes. Lash didn't want to shoot a dying man. "You're bleeding to death," he said. "You belong in a hospital."

"Don't gimme—that shit. Go for—your gun."

"Who shot you, Greer?" If he stalled long enough, Gaffney would pass out for sure. But as long as he was conscious, the man was dangerous.

"Don't know." Gaffney coughed raggedly and drooled blood. "In the—goddamn back. Reach now—blow your—christly head off." He was straining mightily to raise the gun in his right hand, and the long barrel was rising slowly. Greer would never quit.

"Hold it!" Lashtrow said sharply. "Don't be a goddamn fool."

"Draw," Gaffney panted. "Draw—you bastard."

The barrel jerked up into line, and Lash stepped aside just before it torched bright and loud, the slug searing past his left shoulder, slicing the cloth and burning the skin. Any more waiting would be suicide.

The gun stayed up there, the muzzle swerving to cover him, and Lashtrow had no alternative. He drew and fired in one swift fluid motion, the Colt bucking in his right hand, the bullet ripping Gaffney off that column, spinning him away into a long spraddled fall over a chair onto the gallery floorboards. He was dead before he landed there.

Swearing and sheathing his .44, Lashtrow strode on into the lobby, and spoke to the terrified little clerk, who recognized him at once: "What room does Jean Tremblay have?"

"Twenty-four, Mr. Lash. Can I call the law now?"

"Better call the undertaker." Lashtrow started up the stairway, and it was an effort to lift one foot after the other while holding onto the banister. Like shooting a goddamn dead man, he thought bitterly. One of the hardest things I ever had to do, even if the big son-ofabitch had it coming to him.

Lashtrow knew where Room 24 was located, and he approached it with quiet care. He needn't have been so cautious, because there was a fierce heated discussion going on inside, the voices loud and clear through the flimsy partitions. He noticed the bloodstains in front of the door, and figured Jean Tremblay must have shot Gaffney in the back there. It was a miracle how Greer had gotten up and walked downstairs, in such a state of shock that he apparently never considered going after the woman who had shot him. Just wanted to get out of the hotel and back on his horse.

Then Lash was shocked himself, when he realized that the other voice in Jean's room belonged to Henry DeWitt, who was doing most of the talking, strangely enough.

"... Yes, you leeches money from me like a bloodsucker," Henry was saying. "And then you crossed and thwarted me at every turn. Why should I spare you, after what you've done?"

"What did I do, Henry? I don't understand you at all. Never seen you like this before."

"You know good and well what you did, you Jezebel! Don't play the innocent with me, girl. After I poured all that money away, I began to realize that the Mexican army would never reach Laredo or accomplish anything of importance. So I hired someone else to do the job. And you prevented them from succeeding. Not only once, but twice, damn your soul!"

Lashtrow listened in wonderment, scarcely able to believe what he was hearing. Could this be the Henry DeWitt who had been his friend all these years? The

man who'd been almost like a father to him, or at least a kind and loving uncle? What could you believe in and trust, when Henry DeWitt turned out to be a traitorous monster? It left nothing.

"Why did it mean so much to you, Henry, to have Muldoon killed?"

"Because the Shanty Irish scum ruined my career in Washington," DeWitt said, choked with emotion.

"And why did you persist in saving his life? I know now, of course. I should have seen it much sooner. You wanted the money to go to Greer Gaffney, instead of to private assassins. Yet in the end you betrayed Gaffney, too. My God, what an evil creature you are! A composite of all the evil women who ever lived. The world will be well rid of you, Jean Tremblay."

"You can't kill me in cold blood, Henry. Earlier tonight I thought I wanted to die, but not anymore. I want to *live*, Henry! I'm young, I have a whole lifetime ahead of me." Jean was pleading, in utter desperation.

"You have nothing ahead of you, Whore of Babylon, but a journey to hell's lowest and hottest pit."

"You *can't* do it, you mustn't do it! Please don't, Henry. I'll do anything you want. I'll kill Muldoon for you, give me the chance."

"No, I'll do that myself," Henry DeWitt declared. "Should've done it myself, in the first place. Everybody else bungled it, thanks to you, but I won't miss. I killed Gaffney, you are next, and then Muldoon. Three in one night. Not bad for a cultured gentleman of the old school, eh?"

Lashtrow knew it was time for him to move. He didn't need to hear any more. Setting his feet and turning his shoulder, he crashed into the door and burst through into the room, where Jean Tremblay and Henry DeWitt gazed at him in awe-stricken surprise

and wonder. Henry had a stubby pistol in his plump manicured right hand, and he turned it to bear on Lash.

"A shame you had to come at such a time, Lash," said Henry. "I don't want to shoot you, but I'll have to now. You leave me no choice. Don't try to draw!"

Lashtrow shook his tawny head in sorrow. "I'm not going to draw, and you're not going to kill me, Henry."

"Oh yes, I am! Much as I hate to do it. You heard everything. I suppose? Most unfortunate, Lash, for now you have to die."

"No, Henry you're not killing anyone. You didn't even kill Gaffney. I had to finish him off downstairs."

Jean Tremblay sagged down on the disheveled bed. Henry DeWitt remained standing, the .38 trained on Lashtrow, his cherubic countenance no longer mild and pleasant. Lash lounged loosely ten feet in front of him, lean, rangy and battle-grimed, gray eyes steady, hands hanging at his sides.

"I'm killing you, Lash," said Henry firmly. "I've got to, God help me."

"No, we've been friends too long. We're going to stay friends, no matter what happens. Give me the gun, Henry." Lashtrow took a step forward.

"Don't come any closer!" DeWitt cried. "Hold it right there."

Lash advanced another step, concentrating all his will and strength on the immaculate rotund little man before him. "You can't fire at me, Henry. You don't want to kill me. Give me that pistol. *Gimme the god-damn gun!*"

"O Christ!" Henry groaned in despair. "O Jesus!"

Lashtrow had moved even closer. At the last instant, Henry DeWitt tried to turn the pistol on himself, but Lash leaped in and gripped his gunhand, clamping the hammer back under his thumb joint, tearing the weapon out of the small pudgy hand. Henry collapsed

weeping into the chair behind him, both hands clutched to his tormented face. Jean relaxed on the bedside with a long shuddering sigh. Lashtrow stood staring at the stubby Smith & Wesson, dwarfed in his large brown hand. He heard steps outside.

Shadows fell across the shattered door, and Rusty Bouchard and Fox Edley entered the room. Lash had never been so glad to see anyone.

"Reckon the show's over, Lash," said Bouchard, red-bearded jaws chomping on tobacco. "Congratulations on downing Gaffney."

"Henry did most of it. Henry put the first one in him." Lashtrow gestured at the crumpled DeWitt. "Take him in, boys."

"What's the charges?" Edley asked, surprise in his yellow glance.

"For one thing, he financed Pereda and Gaffney," said Lashtrow wearily. "For another, he hired assassins to kill Senator Muldoon. And finally he threatened Miss Tremblay—and me."

Bouchard grinned widely. "Everybody threatens you, for chrisake! Come on, Henry." He lifted the unresisting DeWitt from his chair, as if he were a child, handling him with firm tender care.

"What about her, Lash?" Edley nodded at the girl, yellow eyes quizzical.

"She's going to jail, too," Lashtrow said. "I'll bring her in myself."

Edley smiled, his tough face wistful. "You always did get the best duty, Lash." They went out, with DeWitt drooping between them, spurs tinkling.

Lash poured himself a drink, eyes flicking toward the girl. She shook her bright tousled head. "I've had enough. Can't you let me go, Lash?"

"I don't see how, baby."

"Well, thanks for saving my life, anyway."

"It was my turn," Lashtrow drawled. "You saved mine quite a few times, as I recollect."

Jean Tremblay's smile was crooked and wry. "I also tried to get you killed now and then."

"Yeah, I guess you did, at that." Lashtrow pushed his hat back to hang on its lanyard, and shook his sweaty bronze head. "You've been a puzzle to me—and everybody else. I understand a few things about you now, but mostly I'm still in the dark. Maybe you don't understand yourself."

"That's true, I really don't." Jean's voice was as sad as her smoky gray eyes and patrician features. "I guess I deserve to die. I actually felt I *wanted* to die, earlier tonight." She laughed hoarsely. "But when death looked me in the eye, I changed my mind mighty quick. You know what I mean, Lash?"

"Yeah, I know. Nobody in their right mind wants to die. Life's no bed of roses, maybe, but it's better than nothing at all. Or whatever comes after."

"Well, I really do thank you for saving me, Lash," said Jean Tremblay somberly. "Even prison's better than death, I guess. *Gracias, amigo.*"

"*Por nada,*" Lashtrow drawled, with his slow sad smile. "It was nothing, baby. Strictly in the line of duty, like they always say. I just hope it was worthwhile—or may eventually turn out to be worth it."

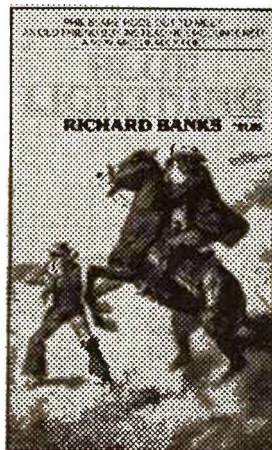
"You have your doubts, don't you, Lash?" Jean smiled inscrutably. "You doubt that my life was really worth saving."

"Not quite that, Jean," said Lashtrow. "But I'll always have doubts about you, I reckon."

Jean Tremblay laughed her impish gamin laugh. "Well, that's all right. Just so you don't forget all about me, Lash darling."

"I'm not apt to do that," Lashtrow said gravely. "Not in a million years."





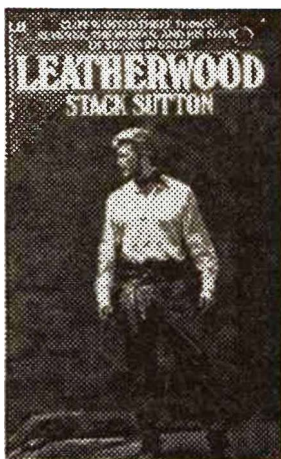
# **BLUE LIGHTNING**

## **By Richard Banks**

PRICE: \$1.75 LB749

CATEGORY: Western

Ex-lawman Phil Baine couldn't believe his ears when the ranchers in Yarmbush Valley claimed that his old friend Hal Armbruster was running them out of business. But when Hal sent a group of hired killers into town Phil got wise. Suddenly it was up to him to defend the frightened ranchers even if it meant a final showdown with his old buddy!



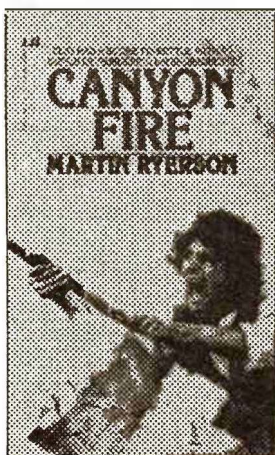
## **LEATHERWOOD**

### **By Stack Sutton**

PRICE: \$1.75 LB748

CATEGORY: Western

Cliff Leatherwood and his friend Andy Perkins are in Rio Verde, just a step ahead of a Texas posse as they crossed the Rio Grande. Caught up in a violent revolution, Leatherwood matches wits and trades lead with a corrupt Army officer and a ruthless bandit. Only the beautiful and courageous Louisa won his respect—but she wanted the gold for the revolution, and Leatherwood was not going to let her have it!



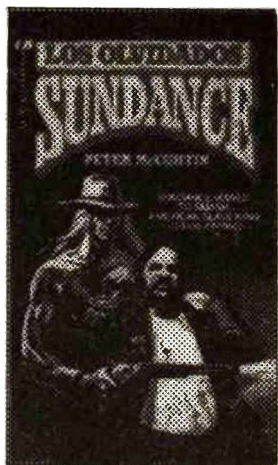
# **CANYON FIRE**

## **By Martin Ryerson**

**PRICE: \$1.75 LB725**

**CATEGORY: Western**

Clay Hunter returns home from the war only to find his parents murdered and their ranch stolen by Gus Faro, a greedy land-thief who was digging the California hills for the legendary treasure of Montezuma. Clay finds refuge with an Indian tribe and falls in love with Juanita, daughter of the chief. With the help of the chief and some of his old wartime comrades, Clay begins an all-out battle in Witch Canyon to avenge the murder of his parents and get back his land!



# **SUNDANCE: LOS OLVIDADOS**

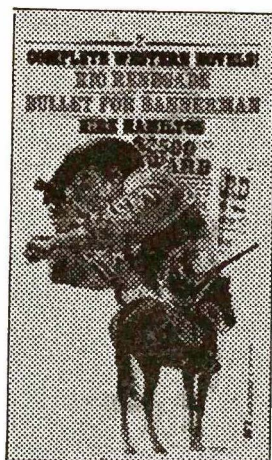
## **(Sundance Series)**

### **By Peter McCurtin**

PRICE: \$1.75 LB724

CATEGORY: Western

Sundance is in the small Mexican city of Las Piedras to meet General Crook of the U.S. Army when he runs into an old friend, the Mexican Escobar. Escobar tells Sundance that he is engaged in trying to help poor Indians who are being enslaved and sold to the big haciendas in the south. Escobar and Sundance join in a desperate and dangerous fight for the "Forgotten Ones" of the distant Indian village who face a fate worse than death!



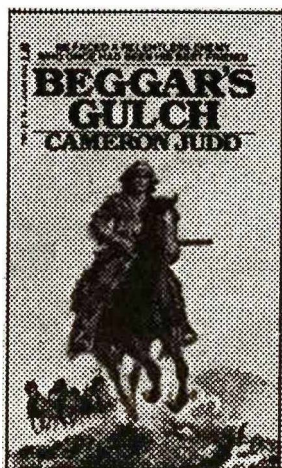
# **RIO RENEGADE and BULLET FOR BANNERMAN**

## **By Kirk Hamilton**

PRICE: \$2.25 LB726

CATEGORY: Western

In **RIO RENEGADE**, Yancey Bannerman, the Enforcer, and Johnny Cato join forces in pursuit of a renegade called the Bearcat. Cato captures the outlaw, but loses him—and nearly loses his own life. It's up to Bannerman to catch up with the Bearcat and bring him in—dead or alive! In **BULLET FOR BANNERMAN**, ranchowner Tristram Griffin is Bannerman's most deadly enemy—and with good reason. The Enforcer had maimed Griffin and eliminated his henchmen, leaving the bitter bad man with no choice but to strike back at the law and the lawmen who had caused him grief!



# **BEGGAR'S GULCH**

## **Cameron Judd**

PRICE: \$1.75 LB733

CATEGORY: Western (original)

Young Matt McAllison escapes from a Kansas lynch mob and flees to Colorado where he finds work as a cowpuncher. Just as his new life is going well, a mysterious band of outlaws kidnaps the rancher's daughter, Melissa. Soon Matt finds that the man he must hunt down to the death had once been his best friend!



# **RIO GRANDE RIPTIDE**

**By Roe Richmond**

**PRICE:** \$1.75 LB734

**CATEGORY:** Western (original)

Texas Ranger Lash Lashtrow is sent to the Mexican border to investigate a series of brutal murders of Mexican women. He is joined by a young Mexican boy, "Chico" Canitas—the son of one of the murdered women—and his old compadre, Rusty Bouchard. Lashtrow soon narrows his suspects to two men, the Iselin brothers, hoping they will lead him to the mind behind the crimes. They do—and Lashtrow finds himself up against the most deadly enemy he has ever encountered!



## (The Sundance Series #32)



# SCORPION

Peter McCurtin

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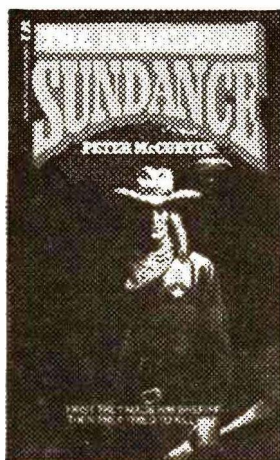
PRICE: \$1.75 LB756

CATEGORY: Western (Original)

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Burt McGill had more to offer than a beautiful wife and a nasty disposition—he had five hundred spanking new Winchesters. Too late, Sundance realized that McGill was in cahoots with the man called The Scorpion, a killer who aimed to be crowned Emperor of Mexico. To pull it off, The Scorpion needed those Winchesters, and a dead Sundance!





# **THE MARAUDERS**

## **Peter McCurtin**

### **(Sundance Series)**

PRICE: \$1.75 LB739

CATEGORY: Western

Blond-haired, copper-skinned Jim Sundance, the halfbreed hero of the prairies, takes on the job of sheriff of Cimarron City when an Indian friend of his is murdered. But Sam Ryker, a powerful cattleman, aimed to take over the town and he wasn't going to let any halfbreed wearing a tin star get in his way. With Ryker's men gunning for him, once again Sundance stands alone!

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was blown sky-high. Then there was  
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