A Gunfire WESTERN NOVEL

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A FULL LENGTH WESTERN NOVEL

BOSS OF THE OK

BY BRETT RIDER

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"It's all work and no pay, with maybe a little fighting now and then," Rose Randall of the Lazy R told tender-foot Lane Mory when she engaged him to work on her ranch. She also told him that several of her riders had been shot — murdered.

Mory had rather figured on going to the OK, which he had inherited from his grandfather. But it didn't take him long to discover that his rightful property had become a rendezous for border scum and the center of rustling activities. So he concealed his identity and teamed up with Rose to carry on from the outside a range war to protect his spread.

BOSS OF THE OK is a thrilling western, expertly told. Read it once and you'll be wanting to read it again.

NOVEL SELECTIONS, INC.

BOSS OF THE OK

by BRETT RIDER

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THE MONTE VERDE and San Carlos stage topped the divide and went rocking down the long grade that looped from Lobo Pass to the blistering floor of the desert.

Pop Slocum's six mules laid back apprehensive ears and fled like jackrabibit in front of the ponderous coach careening at their heels. A rock slide in the Pass had held them up for some thirty minutes, and old Pop was bent on wiping out the lost time. He had a mania for keeping to schedule. It was his boast that only such major incidents as floods or road agents or "pesky Injuns" had kept him from bringing the stage in on time. Lines bunched in big gnarled hands, the wide brim of his hat flattened back from whiskered, leathery face by the screaning wind, the veteran driver hunched forward on his high seat, a booted foot skilfully applying just the proper pressure to the squealing brakes.

The wild run down the Lobo grade was an old story to Pop Slocum. He knew precisely the demands of each perilous haripin turn in the road. His chief concern was that cattle occasionally strayed up the grade from the range. As a warning to such bundering animals to clear the road, Pop kept his voice lifted in a series of wild Apache yells that rose sharp and shrill above the clamor of rattling wheels and pounding hoofs. Ordinary humans, he knew, would have sense enough to avoid

a collision with the descending juggernaut he piloted.

Four passengers bounced and swayed inside the careening vehicle. Two of them, from their garb, were unmistakably cowmen, grizzled old-timers of the range. They shared a seat facing their fellow-passengers, and, save for a certain grim disapproval in their steady eyes, both men showed the same serene indifference to the perils of the Lobo grade. The disapprovel was not meant for Pop Slocum's earnest endeavors to keep faith with his company's timetable, but was aroused by the antics and incoherencies of the large, paunchy man clinging desperately to the opposite seat.

"No call for you to be narvous, mister," finally soothed one of the cowmen. He spoke in a deep, gentle voice. "Pop Slocum knows this

road like he knows his own face."

"The man's drunk—or crazy," babbled the frightened passenger. "I'll never travel stage again! I'll have the scoundrel discharged!"

The would-be comforter shrugged wide, dusty shoulders; the disapproval in his kindly blue eyes deepened to frank distaste. He was tall and big-framed, and had long, drooping moustaches that the years had touched with frost.

The big comman's companion was shorter by several inches, a sturdy, compact person with twinkling black eyes. Despite his almost cherubic

look there was something formidable about him when the twinkle left

the eyes now fastened bleakly on the frightened passenger.

"Mister"-the chubby little cowman's tone was acid-"yore talk makes me real peevish. They don't come better stage drivers than old Pop Slocum."

A violent lurch as the big coach rounded a sharp turn sent the terri-

fied one sprawling from his seat.

"We'll be killed!" he gasped, "The horses are running away-we'll be smashed to bits. . . ."

The two old cowmen exchanged amused grins with the tall youth opposite them. His unperturbed calm had won their secret approval in exact ratio to the extent the fat passenger's hysterics had earned their disapproval.

The latter scrambled back to his seat.

"I'll sue the company for damages!" he spluttered. "It's an outrage

-risking our lives with a drunken driver-half-wild horses-"

"Mister"-there was grim mirth in the little cowman's black eves-"don't you let Pop Slocum hear you misname his mules. He thinks more of his mules than a young daddy thinks of his first-born."

The fat man glowered, but subsided after a look at the speaker's

bleak face. The tall young man by his side spoke softly,

"I'd say the worst is over, sir," he encouraged. "See, we're down on

the flats." He gestured.

"So we are." The fat man glanced briefly at the rushing panorama of desert landscape. "So we are," he repeated, mopping his pallid face face with a large silk handkerchief. "My first visit to the wild and woolly 'West, gentlemen." He leaned back, cigar tilted at a rakish angle, "Out here on a big cattle deal," he told them importantly, "Judson C. Falk is my name, gentlemen-Chicago attorney for the creditors of the OK cattle ranch.

The tall young man gave him a brief glance and resumed his absorbed study of the desert landscape. It was the big cowman who spoke

in his rumbling voice.

"Wasn't hearin' the old OK had gone bankrupt, mister."

"Not exactly bankrupt, but mighty close to the danger line," declared Judson C. Falk. "Means a new deal for the creditors, and that's what brings me to the Spanish Sinks."

"Wasn't hearin' of any creditors neither," again rumbled the tall cowman, "Old Owen Keith wasn't an hombre to borrow money no time."

"That's gospel truth, Sam," nodded his seat-mate. "Old Cap Keith hated debt worse'n he hated a rattler. He'd dicker and trade, but he always was one to pay cash on the nail."

Judson C. Falk's smile was patronizing, "Owen Keith has been dead

over a year," he pointed out. "You gentlemen are not in possession of the facts. The truth is, the ranch is in a bad way."

"There was some talk of a grandson," mused the big cowman.

"Seems queer he ain't showed up and claimed his rights."

"Rumor—idle gossip," scoffed the Chicago man. "Old Keith left no grandson—no heirs, save a lot of creditors." He waved a large, soft white hand. "Tin here to represent the creditors. In fact, I am president of the newly organized OK Land and Cattle Company. We propose to salvage what is left of the wreck."

"So that's the finish of the old OK," grumbled the chunky, blackeyed cowman. He stared bleakly at the complacent president of the new OK Land and Cattle Company. "Sure makes me plenty peevish, Sam, to see a flock of mangy buzzards pickin' the bones of the old OK."

"Me, too, Seth," mourned his big companion. There was a chill light in his keen blue eyes. "Mighty queer business, it strikes me.

Heard old Cap Keith speak of a grandson more'n once."

"Mere gossip!" repeated Judson C. Falk, in an annoyed voice. He darted a resentful look at the smaller cownan. "I do not exactly care for your remark about mangy buzzards, Mr.—"

"Seth McGee is the name, suh," supplied the other man, in his chill voice. "Sam Hally and me own the HM outfit down on the south fork

of the Big Anita.

Big Sam Hally nodded confirmation. "Seth and me knowed Owen Keith back in the old Chisolm Trail days," he explained. "We've drove a sight o' cattle up that old trail—huh, Seth?—before we settled down in the Spanish Sinks."

"Sure have," agreed his partner. "Me, and you, and Owen Keith—"
"And old Bill Randall, before he started his Lazy R spread," re-

minded Sam Hally reminiscently.

Pop Slocum's shrill tones floated to them from the box seat, broke the spell.

"Pinto stage station, folks! Five minutes to rest yore laigs while we change the hitch!"

Brakes squealed, high wheels locked and slid to a halt. The four passengers climbed down from the ancient vehicle to the accompanient of the impatient old driver's shrill admonitions to the hostler.

"Git a move on yuh with them dang mules, Joe! Thar's six minutes to make up afore we hit San Carlos."

Sam Hally stretched his long, gaunt frame and stared with cautious interest at the tall young man who had sat opposite them.

"How do you figger him, Seth?" he queried softly.

"Sure is the tallest hombre I ever laid eyes on," declared Seth Mc-Gce. "The jasper's taller'n you, Sam—and you ain't no dwarf at that." "He ain't no fool kid, for all he looks so young and innocent," opined Sam shrewdly.

"I'd say he's new to this country," was Seth's surmise. "That cowboy rig he wears ain't been saddle-broke."

"It's a right sensible rig," commented Sam. "No fool fancy fixin's, Seth. He may be a tenderfoot, but he ain't dressed like one."

"Don't figger him out at all, Sam." The little HM man shook his head. "Kind of like his style, and he's got plenty of sand in his craw. Was watchin' him close when old Pop Slocum played hell with us hightailin' down the Lobo. Never turned a hair—just grinned like he was

havin' a good time."

Sam nodded. "Reckon the boy's got plenty nerve," he agreed. "Had my eye on him, too. A bueno hombre, Seth—the sort of feller that can take it, and grin at the devil." The big cowman's grizzled brows drew down thoughtfully. "Did you see the queer look he gave that fat

lawyer shark when the feller was shootin' off his mouth about the OK?"
"Reckon I can see things as good as you can." retorted Seth huffily.

"What about it, Sam?"

"Nothin'--much," murmured his tall partner. "Was sort of thinkin' about things. . . ."

"You dang old longhorn," jeered Seth fondly, "I know what's on yore mind. You'd give a year's calf-crop to be able to dig up that thar missin' grandson you was tellin' Falk about."

"I'd give a heap more," Sam Hally muttered. He glanced distastefully at the portly Judson C. Falk, who was making overtures to the skeptical-eyed Pop Slocum. "I don't like that two-faced hombre, Seth. We know he's a coward, and I've a doggone good notion he's a lyin' skunk into the bargain." Scorn put a rasp in the big cattleman's rumbling voice. "Look at him—tellin' old Pop how he liked that run down the grade, and after him bawlin' like a scared maverick the bull time!"

"The feller seems awful sure of himself," worried Seth McGee.

Reckon he wouldn't be so free with his talk about the OK if he didn't know it's like he was tellin' us."

"I ain't likin' his smooth talk about the OK," muttered Sam. "I ain't likin' this business, Seth. You and me has both heard old Cap Keith talk of a grandson."

"Mebbe the grandson went and died," suggested his partner helpfully. "If he ain't dead, where is he?"

Old Pop Slocum's shrill voice came to them.

"Step lively, folks! Ain't got no time to waste if we aim to make San Carlos on the dot. All right, Joe, turn 'em loose!"

They were on their way. The fresh mule-hitch flashed fleet, twinkling heels. The big stage rocked and swayed on its great springs.

Judson C. Falk smiled genially over a fresh cigar at his taciturn seat-

"Didn't get your name, young man, when we were talking back on the road, or didn't you say—"

"I didn't say," admitted the young stranger laconically.

"I'm a sociable sort," declared the lawyer. "When I'm traveling I like to be friendly with my fellow-passengers."

Seth McGee's acid voice broke in.

"Out here, in this man's country, we figger an hombre's name is his own business."

The tall young man grinned around at him. "Well," he drawled goodnaturedly, "I wouldn't want the gentleman from Chicago to think I'm on the dodge from the law, or something reprehensible. My name, sir," he addressed the lawyer courteously, "and I assure you it is my own true name—I do solemnly swear to the best of my knowledge and belief, as you legal men make us say in court—is Lane Mory."

"Took you a long time to get to it," chuckled Seth. He winked up at his big partner and grinned quizzically at Judson C. Falk. "Reckon

you're satisfied now, suh."

The portly Chicago man waved his soft, white hand and favored Lane Mory with a bland smile.

"Pleased to make your acquaintance, young man," he acknowledged smoothly. "You are also in the cattle business, I infer. A true son of this great Western land, it is plain to see, Mr. Mory."

Lane Mory's blue eyes twinkled at the inscrutable faces of the two

range veterans.

"I regret to say, sir, that your inference is erroneous. I cannot claim that honor—yet. This is my first glimpse of the wide open spaces of the great wild West." Again he twinkled an amused look at the impassive-faced HM partners. "In fact, sir," he concluded dryly, "you may put me down as from points East."

"Points East!" echoed Judson C. Falk. He chuckled. "Covers a lot

of territory, my young friend."

Lane Mory's smile was coldly polite, and with something like a hint of distaste in his clear, dark blue eyes he returned his attention to the receding landscape. The company lawyer winked humorously at the HM partners.

"Our young friend is not over-loquacious," he murmured over his

cigar.
"Mister"—the short-tempered Seth McGee bent a frosty look on the man from Chicago—"that thar word don't listen good to me." He significantly tapped a big .45 holstered against his thigh. "Out in this man's land an hombre can make a heap o' trouble for hisself with usin' the wrong word."

Lane Mory grinned around at the fiery old cowman.

"Mr. Falk means I'm not given to over-much talk, sir," he explained in his pleasant voice. "No insult was intended, I am sure, Mr. McGee. My thanks to you just the same."

The grizzled cowmen exchanged dazed looks, and Sam Hally said in his mild rumble, "I take it, young feller, you mean that word he called you was a sort of compliment. Out in our country folks don't think so much of a loose tongue."

"Thank you, Mr. Hally." For a brief instant Lane Mory's lazy smile played at the big cowman. "The truth is, I'm fascinated with the wild

beauty of this desert scenery and find myself a bit tongue-tied." "Can't be beat the world over," boasted Seth McGee.

The ten miles from Pinto to San Carlos passed swiftly in clouds of dust while Sam and Seth good-naturedly pointed out the things they knew and loved. Old El Toro, lifting an ermine cape to the sunset sky. Lofty San Jacinto, far to the east, already flushed with old rose tints.

Pop Slocum's shrill voice rose in tones triumphant.

"San Carlos, folks! On the dot! Hope yuh enjoyed the run, folks, even if I did pore leather some at them pesky, no-'count mules!" Brakes squealed, dust lifted and drifted in the evening breeze,

Lane Mory's first glimpse of San Carlos gave him a picture of a wide, dusty street and a big, swinging sign that proclaimed the stage

was passing the Horsehead Saloon and Dance Hall, Cow ponies drooped at the hitch-rail, and a lanky rider off-saddling from a bald-faced sorrel lifted a hand in recognition of the two HM cowmen grinning at him from their seats.

They passed a store with a wide, ornate false front. The lettering on the dusty sign that extended the width of the building told the young stranger he was getting his first look at Frake's General Emporium. The information left him cold, but not so the attractive young girl, slimly erect in the driver's seat of a buckboard drawn up in front of the store. She waved gaily at old Pop Slocum on the high box seat of the stage lumbering past her, and Lane Mory was aware of shining dark hair under a saucy white hat, and cool, fearless dark eyes smiling up at the two old HM cowmen sitting opposite him.

"Rose Randall is growed into a good-lookin' young woman," yowed Seth McGee fervently. "Old Bill Randall's granddaughter has turned

out a right smart-lookin' heifer, Sam."

"Rose is right good-lookin'," agreed Sam Hally, contentedly, "She's as brave and fine as she is purty, Seth." He shook his massive head sorrowfully. "The lass needs to be brave-the way things is shapin' at the old Lazy R these times."

The high wheels ground for a few more moments, and the big stage came to a standstill in front of the Cattlemen's Hotel, a large twostory frame building with a wide porch. A huge mountain of a man sat in an armchair near the hotel door. He wore a loose, shapeless linen coat and trousers, and his large face was smooth and pink under a bald skull. One limp hand held a gently waving palm-leaf fan.

Pop Slocum greeted this Buddha-like person with a flourish of his whip.

"On time to the dot, Luke!" he yipped, and grinned around triumphantly at the portly passenger from Chicago. "It takes a good mulehitch to git vuh thar on time to the dot, mister." Pop dropped a sly wink at the others

The lawyer chose to ignore the stage driver's jibe, He climbed stiffly from the big dusty stage and advanced with outstretched hand on the

enormous hotel man, inert in his huge armchair,

"Luke Weller, I believe. I wrote to you from Chicago. I'm Falk-Judson C. Falk."

Something like annovance glinted briefly in the hotel man's reddish. ferrety eyes sunk deep in folds of flesh. The shining bald head wagged dubiously.

"Sorry, sir. Never heard of you, and have had no letter." Luke Weller heaved his vast bulk from the chair. "Reckon we can fix up a nice room for you, if that's what you wrote for. Looks like your letter went astray, but it don't matter. We 'most always have plenty room at this hotel."

His wheezy, husky voice never stopped until he disappeared with his guest into the dark interior of the lobby.

HORSEMEN RODE UP THE STREET, and the low sun made pale golden haze of the dust that drifted lazily in their wake. Sam Hally said in his deep, kindly voice: "Aimin' to put up at Luke's place, son?"

Lane Mory eyed the canvas-wrapped bed-roll Pop Slocum had dragged from the stage boot and dumped on the board sidewalk at his feet.

"I suppose I'll need a place to sleep tonight," he replied. His gaze went to the approaching riders, "In fact, I've no plans, save that I want a job as soon as I can find one."

"What kind of a job, son?"

"With some good cattle outfit." Lane Mory grinned at the HM

partners. "Perhaps you can use a man at your ranch?"

Sam shook his head regretfully, "Not takin' on any new hands right now, young feller," His tone was dubious, "Ever done any ridin'? With a cattle outfit, I mean," he added.

"Not yet," confessed the youth. He started with boyish interest at the horsemen jingling past. "Always thought I'd like to learn the cow business. That's what I'm here for."

"The cow business ain't all it's cracked up to be," commented Seth

McGee dryly.

"Takes experience—and years of it," rumbled the big partner. He chuckled. "Seth and me has been with cattle all our lives, and we're still larnin' things."

"It's a gamble all the way down the line," Seth declared. "Dry years, rustlers, crooked land-grabbin' politicians, pesky squatters, and bob

wire. The good old days are gone."

"It's the big outdoors—a man's life," counted the would-be novitiate good-naturedly, not a whit dismayed by the pessimism of these two old-timers. "Anyway I'm young. I have lots of time to learn; and the best way is to get a job with some good outfit." He smiled at their dubious faces. "If the cattle business is so terrible, why have you stuck to it all your lives?"

"Because we're a pair of doggone fools, I reckon," chuckled the stocky Seth McGee. "Well, young feller, let's see if we can figger out some outfit whar an eager young tenderfoot can git a chance to drag

his spurs."

The two old cowmen conferred with low-voiced earnestness.

"Thar's the old Cross Knife," suggested Sam Hally. "Don Mike Callahan mebbe could take on a new rider."

Seth was doubtful about the Cross Knife. "Thar's Clem Sanders' Box B," he suggested in turn. "Two of Clem's boys quit him last round-up—went to farmin' for theirselves. . . ."

One by one the HM men checked off the names of various cow outfits in the Spanish Sinks.

"There's the OK ranch," finally reminded Lane Mory.

"The OK ain't no place for yore sort," Seth told him bleakly.

"I'd have a chance now that I've met Falk," argued Lane. "Falk said he's the president of the new company..."

"I wouldn't figger on a job with the OK bunch," Sam Hally interrupted mildly. He seemed reluctant to explain, Lane's glance went to the trim young girl waiting in the buckboard across the street in front of the store.

"How about the-the Lazy R?" he ventured to suggest.

Sam Hally shook his head. "No chance there, son," he said, a bit sadly. "Rose Randall is up against it hard. She couldn't take on a new hard, el alone a tender/oot."

"Well"—the tall youth shrugged his wide shoulders—"it's up to me to brace our Judson C. Falk. If I can land a job with the OK, I'll

grab it." He picked up his bed-roll. "Thank you just the same, gentlemen."

"Won't say adios yet," Sam said genially. "Seth and me figger on eatin' supper at the hotel. We'll be seein' you before we leave for the ranch."

"Got to git our broncs from Murphy's first," put in his partner. "Should be a nice moon for the ride home, Sam, he added. "Means we can take the short cut by way of Callahan's Crossing."
"Save us a good ten miles," agree Sam Hally. He explained to Lane

Mory about Callahan's Crossing.

"It's whar you make the Big Anita. Tricky crossin' below Spanish Bluffs. Bad quicksands, and if you don't aim right for the sandbar you sure find voreself in plenty trouble. Don Mike's grandfather-him that married Anita Pinzon after the Mexican War-lost a thousand head o' Cross Knife cows that one time. Been called Callahan's Crossing ever since."

"Sure is one malo place," averred Seth. He shook his head warningly at the young tenderfoot. "Watch yore step, son, if you ever aim for Callahan's Crossing."

They went on their way to Murphy's barn, bronze-faced, hardy men, still lance-straight and lean of waist for all their sixty odd years. Lane Mory's gaze followed them with admiring interest, then went to the slim young girl in the buckboard.

His hope that the girl would look his way was not to be granted. It was obvious that her attention was fastened upon another contingent of riders approaching up the street. It was equally apparent that Miss Randall was not overjoyed by the sight of these horsemen. Even from where he stood Lane Mory saw her quick dismay. With an annoyed gesture she sprang from he buckboard, and Lane had a glimpse of slim, shapely knees under the whip of the short linen skirt she wore over black boots of soft leather. With another look at the rapidly nearing riders, she fled with the grace of a startled fawn into the dusk of Frake's store.

His curiosity aroused, Lane lingered for a closer view of the horsemen whom the girl so obviously wished to avoid. They drew rein in front of the Horsehead Saloon and Dance Hall, some half-score hardfaced men whose attire proclaimed them for what they were-cowboys in from one of the outlying ranches. A hardy, capable-looking crew, and picturesque in their wide-brimmed hats and dusty leather chaps. spurs jingling as they jostled noisily through the swing-doors of the saloon. Lane sensed that the tall, bull-shouldered man wearing the high Mexican steeple hat was this hard-bitten outfit's leader-probably the foreman. Decidedly a dandy, from the looks of him. His get-up was more elaborate and expensive than was usual, and Lane observed that

the saddle on the big black horse ridden by the man was also richly decorated with silver mountings.

There was a curious gleam in Lane's blue eves as he stared at the big black horse. The brand was unmistakable. These men were OK riders. He went thoughtfully into the hotel lobby with his bed-roll. Rose Randall had undoubtedly wished to avoid being seen by the OK contingent. The girl's panic had been too apparent for Lane to reach any other conclusion. He found himself wondering if the source of her alarm was the tall dandy in the high steeple hat. Lane rather inclined to this belief. There was power and ruthlessness in the man, for all the fancy trappings he affected. It was more than possible that the attractive owner of the Lazy R had taken the fellow's fancy. He was the type a girl would find difficult to manage.

The small lobby was empty, save for the skinny individual behind the battered desk. A super-annuated cowboy. Lane surmised from the looks of him. He had a weathered, deeply lined face, and long gray moustaches that drooped mournfully and had the vellow tinge of a

habitual tohacco-chewer

He took expert aim at a spittoon and fixed the tall young stranger

with a rheumy-eved look,

"One dollar a day, and two bits extry when vuh use the bath," The ancient desk-clerk spoke his piece in a tired, piping voice, and one sensed that only some extraordinary event would arouse him from his apathy. Lane wondered what stark tragedy could have placed that mask of misery on the old man's face.

"I'll be using the bath, too," he smiled.

"The boss likes strangers to pay in advance when they travel light." said the clerk, in his lifeless tone. He glanced briefly at the bed-roll under the young man's arm.

Lane put down the proper amount. "I don't expect to be staying more than one night," he explained.

The clerk nodded indifferently and selected a key from the array on the board at his back.

"Room twenty-six," he said. "Reckon vuh kin find vore own way." He gestured at the stairs. "Last door at the end of the passage."

Lane thanked him and went up the stairs. There was no sign of Judson C. Falk, nor of the enormous Luke Weller. The young man's expression was oddly grim as he thought of Judson C. Falk. His new friends of the HM ranch would have been startled, perhaps, if they could have seen that curiously grave look on the young tenderfoot's face. It quite obliterated the boyish innocence from the blue eyes.

Room 26 was sparsely furnished with a narrow bed that sagged in the middle. A tired-looking bed that frankly informed the eye not to expect over-much comfort. A patchwork quilt hid what sins might be underneath, but the pillow-slip was fresh and clean, and Lane felt that he could hope for as much of the blankets under the crazy quilt. A Winchester Arms calendar hung in the middle of one wall, and some playful former occupant of the room had neatly shot the eyes out of the painted Indian warrior pictured on his horse. At the head of the bed was a chair with a rawhide seat, and a washstand stood in another corner. There was a wash-basin, and, on the floor by the washstand, a partly filled water bucket.

Lane dropped his roll on the bed and opened it up, revealing his few personal effects: an extra flannel shirt; a change or two of under-clothes, including socks; an oilskin slicker; a razor and a lather brush and a tooth brush; and—what would have brought surprise to the eyes of the HM men—an old-fashioned Sharps rifle that looked as if

it had seen considerable use.

The young man stood eyeing the big gun for a few moments, and again the grim, hard look crept into his eyes. With a sudden shrug of wide shoulders he pulled off his flannel shirt and turned to the wash-basin.

The dust of travel removed, he combed his damp thick blond hair with a pocket comb, and then retied the bed-roll. It was evident that he wished to keep chance eyes from discovering the Sharps rifle.

He closed and locked the door, and made his way down to the lobby, Still no sign of Judson C. Falk, although several men now lounged in the chairs, apparently awaiting the call to supper. Two lean-hipped cowboys came in, procured keys, and went clattering up the stairs, throwing brief but curious looks at the tall young stranger. Lane sensed that their hard, wise eyes saw him for a tenderfoot, despite his western garb.

"Supper bell rings at six," the weary-eyed clerk told him, as he tossed down his room key.

Lane went out to the wide veranda, conscious of lazily curious eyes. A dusty buckboard drew up in front of the entrance, and a young woman climbed from the seat and turned to lift a year-old girl baby into her arms. A second youngster, a sturdy boy of six or-seven, scrambed out from the back seat. Lane gave the latter a slow, amused grin. He was absurdly like the stocky, sun-burned, youngish cowman holding the reins, even to a tiny pair of flapping leather chaps and low slung holster with its toy gun. The young woman saw Lane's amused look and gave him a friendly smile. She was a wholesome, buxom sort, with a pleasant face.

"Don't be long, Clem," she said to the man. "The children will want supper."

"Sure, Nell," promised the cowman. "Just as quick as I get the

team put up. But I got to stop an' see Ed Frake first 'bout them saddles I ordered."

"Frake won't close till after nine," reminded the woman. "I'll want

some things too after supper."

She hurried into the lobby with the girl baby. The boy clattered behind her on little high-heeled boots; tiny spurs rasped across the boards. The man rattled on down the street towards Murphy's barn.

The sun had dropped behind the distant ridge of mountains, and lofty El Toro, sentinel peak of the Spanish Sinks, made a vast dark mass against the pale gold of the cloudless evening horizon. The wide, dusty street took on the soft mellow mantle of twilight; the air was still with the passing of the day.

The old man came from behind his desk and put a match to the big kerosene lamp that swung from a chain above the veranda door. Other lights sprang out in Frake's General Emporium across the street, pale gleamings that would take on brilliance with the deepening shadows of

the fast approaching night.

More riders drifted up the street, making little riffles of dust that quickly subsided in the lifeless air. Two of them off-saddled in front of the hotel and went into the lobby, inscrutable poker-faces turning briefly towards the tall lounger as they passed. A white-aproned man appeared from the saloon door and lighted the swing lamp under the painted horse head, and after pausing for a moment to look up and down the street disappeared again behind the swing-doors.

Lane all this time was watching the buckboard still waiting in front of the store across the street. A man appeared with a sack of flour, which he deposited in the rear of the vehicle; and suddenly Lane saw Rose Randall, hesitating inside the wide entrance to the store. Even from where he stood her nervousness was apparent. Lane waited, conscious of an odd impulse to go to her. The girl was frightened, he

realized, with a growing anger at the cause of her fears.

The HM partners came drifting up through the fading twilight from Murphy's barn on their horses, and drew rein to speak to the stocky young cowman who had deposited the woman and her children at the

hotel. Clem Sanders, of the Box B. Lane guessed,

Lane's attention went back to the girl hesitating in the entrance to Frake's store. Apparently assured that the coast was clear, she started towards the buckboard-came to a frozen standstill as the wearer of the steeple hat suddenly lurched from the swing-doors of the saloon.

For a brief moment the OK man's high shape stood motionless; and

Lane saw quick recognition flare in his eyes.

"Bueno!" A quick stride brought him to her side. "Doggone if it ain't our sweet little Rose!" He leered at her drunkenly. "You sure are one shy little wild rose, honey. Never can get to see you no more," he complained. His hand fell to the girl's arm. "Beginnin' to think you're dodging me, my pretty maid."

"Take your hand away!" she said furiously.

His black, insolent eyes ogled her with drunken amusement.

"Reckon not, sweetheart. I'm in a right lovin' mood an' cravin' a

good time." The OK man teetered on his high heels. "Come on, gal, let's have a drink an' some dancin'." He gestured at the swing-doors. "You're drunk!" The girl wrenched futilely to free her arm from his

heavy grasp, "I-I could kill vou!" she gasped.

Her resistance fed the man's passion. He laughed drunkenly, swept her close to him, an arm tight around the slim waist.

"I'm kissin' you for that," he hiccuped. "Always figgered to kiss you some day, Miss highty-tighty stuck-up Rose with the red, red lips-" Her free hand swung up at the swarthy, leering face bending down to her.

"I'll kiss you good an' proper," swore the steeple-hat man.

His head jerked back under the grip of a powerful hand. He swung around with an oath. Lane Mory's hand balled into a hard fist that cracked with shocking impact against the OK man's jaw, and the latter sprawled his length on the dusty boards of the sidewalk. He bounded to his feet, hand dragging at holstered gun. Again the tall young stranger's fist lashed at the snarling-lipped face. The saloon doors swung open with a bang and men swarmed out to the sidewalk. Shouts and curses came from them at the sight of the beating being handed to their companion. An OK rider jerked at his gun. A .45 roared, and the gun fell from the man's fingers. His hands went up above his head.

"Reach for the sky-pronto!"

Seth McGee reined his chunky black horse, his voice thin and deadly, his smoking .45 menacing the group in front of the saloon. Sam Hally spurred up to his side on his tall roan, and behind the two grim-eyed HM partners showed the equally grim-faced Clem Sanders, hands hovering over gun-butts.

"You OK fellers think you own this cowtown, but you don't-not by a long shot," rasped Seth McGee. His long-barrelled Colt menaced them. "Any hombre that interferes shore gets plenty salivated."

"Ash Burr had it comin' to him," rumbled old Sam, "I saw the play he was makin'."

The big OK man got to his feet and staggered into the saloon, leaving his high steeple hat lying in the gutter. His companions trooped silently at his heels.

"You should have shot the skunk's gizzard out of him," grumbled the dour little Seth McGee, with a careless disregard for the anatomical make-up of a skunk, "Pesterin' a decent gal like Miss Randall!" The look he bestowed on Lane Mory was admiring. "You'd best use yore gun next time," he warned. "You done the right thing, an' done it proper, but you got yore foot on the Great Divide when you beat Ash Burr like you did. Ash'll lay for you. He's one *malo* hombre."

The two HM partners rode on to the hotel, followed by the stocky Clem Sanders. Rose Randall gave the tall blond youth a faint smile.

"I—I'm sorry—to have got you into trouble," she murmured. "It—it was splendid of you—"

Their eyes met in a long look; and suddenly they were smiling at each other.

"I think I saw you come in on the stage with Sam and Seth," the

girl said shyly. "I'm Rose Randall," she added. "You were very good—to come to my help. I can't thank you enough—" She hesitated, candid eyes regarding him inquiringly.

"Lane Mory," he told her.

"You're a stranger here?"

"Tenderfoot," grinned Lane. "Looking for a job with some cow outfit."

outn...
"Oh." Rose regarded him dubiously. "It's not easy to get a job at this time of the year—and a tenderfoot—" Her eyebrows went up.

"I can learn," smiled the young man, frankly admiring the eyebrows the lovely dark eyes underneath them. "Met a man on the stage," he went on. "He's something important with the OK people." He glanced across the street at the hotel. "He's staying over there, and I'll do my best to wangle a job from him."

"The OK," murmured the girl. She gave him an odd little smile. "I'm afraid you are fired before you're hired."

He stared inquiringly.

"I mean you lost your chance for a job with the OK when you came to my defense just now and beat up that man." She threw a disdainful glance at the steeple hat lying in the dust of the street. "It happens that he is the foreman of the OK outfit." Her tone took on a worried note. "I'm afraid Ash Burr would rather kill you than give you a job, after what has happened."

Lane's smile was rueful. "Stands to reason he won't," he admitted dryly. "I fear Ash Burr's feelings towards me now will be anything but

friendly."

She stepped lithely into the buckboard and reached for the reins wrapped around the whip. "I'm dreadfully sorry," she said slowly, looking around at him. "And yet I'm not so sure that I am as sorry is I should be—losing you a job. I've an idea you're more lucky than you know. You don't seem the—the sort of man who would like it at the OK ranch."

"That's what Sam Hally told me." Lane's tone was puzzled. "There seems to be something wrong with the OK, I'm beginning to think."

Rose studied him with her candid eyes. "I'm glad Sam told you that," she said finally. "There is something wrong with the OK-something very wrong." She gave him a brief parting smile. "I must go now. It's a long drive to the ranch, and those men may come out again."

He watched her drive up the street with regretful eyes. There was something pathetically lonely about the trim young girl vanishing into the dusk in that buckboard. He longed to be there by her side-was suddenly aware of an odd emptiness in his heart. . . . Was also suddenly aware that the buckboard had halted, and that Rose Randall was beckoning to him. He went swiftly up the board sidewalk. With a little gesture that told him to follow, she drove on and around the corner.

"I didn't want anybody to see us talking," she explained, when he paused by the buckboard. "The truth is I'm dreadfully worried about

vou."

"About me!" The young man's tone was a bit dazed. "That's funny! I-well, I was worrying about you-driving off into the night-looking so lonely."

"I'm not afraid of the dark," laughed Rose, obviously touched. Color waved into her smooth cheeks. "That is funny-for you to worry

about me."

She shrugged slim young shoulders. "You heard what Seth McGee said about Ash Burr." Her tone was troubled. "Seth told you the truth. Ash Burr is a bad man-a dangerous man. He'll kill you if he can. He's a dead shot," she added, with a dubious glance at the six-gun in Lane's holster.

"I'm not afraid of him," he said lightly.

"He's the sort who'll shoot you in the back," Rose pointed out. "Ash Burr is a coward. He won't fight fair-give you a chance."

"You mean, if I'm wise I'll get out of town?" The young man's boyish face hardened, "I'll not run from any man, let alone run from Ash Burr."

"He'll kill you, or have you killed, if you stay in San Carlos." Rose spoke desperately, "I'll feel dreadful-that it's my fault,"

"I'll leave San Carlos when I'm ready-when I've landed a job and have a place to go to," Lane insisted stubbornly. "Thank you just the same, Miss Randall-for-for your kindness."

She regarded him soberly. "A job," she echoed, spacing the two words slowly. "You-you will leave San Carlos-if you have a job? Leave immediately? Tonight? Now?"

Lane nodded.

"You have a job." Rose smiled faintly. "You have a job right now -with the Lazy R. The Lazy R is my ranch," she explained. "Although it is not what it used to be." She lifted an expressive shoulder.

He stared at her, dumbstruck.

"You're hired," she laughed, "Climb in, tenderfoot, It's a long road to the ranch "

"I must get my war-bag from the hotel," Lane said, finding his voice. "Not now," demurred the girl. "There'll be trouble if any of those men see you ride away with me. We'll be followed."

"Can't leave my things," insisted Lane. "I've things I can't afford the risk of losing.'

She saw that he was not be turned from his purpose.

"I'll wait for you," she reluctantly agreed. Her face brightened. "There's a deep coulée back of the hotel. It twists around and crosses the road a few hundred yards from here. You can follow it down to the crossing. I'll be waiting there, behind a big clump of mesquite."

"I won't be long," Lane promised. He turned away, aware of an odd thrill.

"Don't let anybody see you leave the hotel," she called out softly as he moved away. "Go out the back way." She drove on into the fastgathering darkness.

Lane found her waiting as agreed, in the dip behind the mesquite. He threw in his bed-roll and climbed into the seat by her side.

"Anybody see you?"

"I don't think so," Lane reassured her, "An old Indian, loafing down the street."

"Pinto," frowned the girl, "An old scamp, but harmless,"

"I told Sam Hally." Lane said, as she put the team to a fast trot. "Sam and Seth have worried if I hadn't showed up for supper as I'd promised."

"They are good men, those two old-timers," Rose said. "They knew my grandfather in the old davs."

The twilight faded: night rushed at them under a jewelling sky.

LUKE WELLER said in his wheezy voice, "I'm a careful sort of man, Mr. Falk, which is why I'm sittin' pretty in this cowtown. I've got a good reputation here with all the best folks." The hotel man's enormous bulk stirred in the huge desk-chair. "Ain't nothing worse than waggin' a loose tongue," he reproached. "Gets a man into trouble; maybe goes and spoils the work of years,"

The portly man from Chicago chewed nervously on his fat cigar. He was hard-boiled himself and not given to over-much consideration for the emotions of a fellow-crook, but the curious glow in those reddish ferret eyes, the Buddha-like serenity of the enormous man opposite him, sent an odd tingle down his spine. There was something definitely sinister about Luke Weller as he sat there and stared at Judson C. Falk.

"Shouldn't wonder but what you talked a lot to your fellow passengers comin' in on the stage," grumbled the hotel man. "Fellers get chummy on a long stage ride-sort of confidential."

Judson C. Falk tossed his fraved cigar into the big spittoon conveniently placed near the desk and made a determined grab at his van-

ishing self-confidence.

"Those two old mossbacks?" he sneered. "Hell! As dumb as the cows they've been chasing all their lives!" He helped himself to a fresh cigar from his expensive leather case. "Needn't worry about those two old hangovers from a prehistoric past," he chuckled.

"Don't fool yourself," Luke Weller said, in his toneless, wheezy voice. "Sam Hally and his partner are two of the shrewdest men in the Spanish Sinks. They know their cows, and they savvy-men."

Falk waved his cigar in a gesture of disbelief, "I know men, too," he confided, with a patronizing smile. "You've been letting this OK

business get on your nerves, Luke."

"Your sort gets familiar too quick," complained the hotel man. He wagged his big head disapprovingly. "Folks here mustn't get a notion that you and Luke Weller have any dealin's that don't come sort of natch'ral 'tween me and a new lawver that aims to put up his shingle in this town."

"A wise suggestion," smiled the lawyer. Wicked amusement lurked in his pale eyes. "I fully expect to build up a lucrative practice in San Carlos, Mr. Weller." Judson C. Falk leaned back in his chair and laughed good-humoredly. "No doubt the Cattleman's Hotel has outstanding bills that need legal attention."

"I ain't never been one that's cared much for jokin'," Luke Weller said in his wheezy, whispering voice, "Try and remember that, Mr. Falk "

Again the portly Chicago man was unpleasantly aware of that disturbing tingle down his spine.

"Certainly, Mr. Weller," he rejoined hurriedly. "I'll be most careful sir "

"Humor is all right in its place," went on the cold, whispering voice, "but there ain't no humor in this business that you've come to do for me, Mr. Falk." Something that resembled a smile creased the inscrutable Buddha face, "I looked you up, and I sort of figgered you was the man I wanted."

Judson C. Falk's beefy face paled, but he managed an appreciative smile, a negligent wave of his cigar. The hotel man's ferret eves glinted from the deep folds of fat.

"Looked you up," he repeated. "Nice record chalked up on your board, Mr. Falk. Two years in prison for forgin' a man's name to a trust and takin' the widow's mite." Luke Weller's large, flabby hands folded over his stomach. "There's other little things I learned about you, Mr. Falk. An indictment for murder, but the police lost sight of you—don't know the name you're usin' these days—"

"You-you devil!" snarled the other man. The cigar fell from his fingers. His fat-encased body trembled; and his hand crept up, fum-

bled inside his coat. "What does all this talk mean?"

"Keep your hand from that shoulder-gun under your coat, Mr. Falk." Luke Weller's tone lost its sleepy wheeze. "No chance for you to use that gun." He gestured, and a swarthy face peered briefly from behind a curtained alcove. "Manuel can pull a faster trigger than you can, Mr. Falk."

The baited lawyer's hand fell back to a plump knee, and he gazed with wide-open, frightened eyes at the serene Buddha-face opposite him.

"I faggered you was the man I wanted," repeated Luke Weller. His huge body settled back in the big chair. "Told you I was sort of careful —don't take chances; that's why I faggered you was my man—got you to fix up this new OK Cattle Company for me—all legal and proper." The hotel man's tiny red eyes bored like driving gimlets at the pallid face across the desk. "What sort of talk did you give Sam Hally and his partner?" Luke Weller's wheezy voice cracked. "Tim tellin' you bad news when I say Sam's partner is a killin' gent—fastest man in the Spanish Sinks with his shootin' irons."

Falk wilted, stared with glazing eyes at the other man.

"Nothing much. Talked about that crazy stage driver," faltered Judson C. Falk. He gulped on his cigar and spat at the convenient spittoon. "Hell of a driver we had," he complained sourly. "Came down that mountain like a fool. No sense at all. If you have any authority with the stage company, I'd suggest you have the old man fred from his job."

"I own the stage company," Luke Weller told him, in his high, wheezy voice. "I'm tellin' you, Falk, I don't hire fools to work for me, and that's why I aim to know just what you talked about to those HM men."

"Nothing-much," repeated the sweating Chicago man.

"What did you tell 'em?" The high, whispering voice was relentless. "I like to know all the talk—when the talk comes from men I hire, Mr. Falk." The hotel man's fish mouth loosened in a grin. "That's why I sit pretty in this cowtown."

"I happened to say that I was the president of the new OK Land and Cattle Company," confessed the Chicago man. "No harm in telling them about the new company," he defended himself.

Luke Weller waved a flabby hand at him and heaved his enormous frame from the desk-chair.

"A fight out there," he said, peering through the window. "Couple of fellers flingin' fists." His tone hardened. "Seth McGee, on his black

horse-and throwin' his gun down on 'em-"

He continued to watch from his post at the curtained window, one hand waving back his companion, who had jumped from his chair. And when he finally turned away his large face was inscrutable.

"Nothin' to worry about," he told Falk, as he lowered his huge bulk into the desk chair. His hand lifted, and suddenly the swarthy-faced

Manuel stepped from behind the alcove curtain. "Si, senor," muttered the man, in response to the quick, sibilant

words flung at him in Spanish. He vanished through a side-door,

The hotel man's look went to Falk. He spoke quietly.

"So you told 'em some news about the OK Land and Cattle Company?" he continued. "What did you tell 'em, Mr. Falk?"

The lawyer squirmed, eyed the ash of his cigar.

"Happened to mention I was the president of the new company," he reluctantly repeated. His head lifted. "Didn't think telling them would be news. Weller. It's a fact—and will be in the papers."

The hotel man stared at him, the odd red light again flickering in

his ferret eves.

"I'm hopin' you ain't the fool you seem to be," he said, with a violence that lifted his voice to a parrot's raucous squawk. "Damn your easy tongue, mister." His eyes gleamed. "How about that tall young feller? Talk to him, too-tell him all about your business in San Carlos?"

"Well, I guess he heard what I said to Hally and McGee," mumbled Falk sulkily. "No need to worry about him. Just a dumb kid looking

for a job. Said he wanted to be a cowboy."

"Where was he from?" queried Luke Weller sharply.
"He was a bit vague." Falk's smile was back, and he waved his

cigar. "Said something about being from points East."

The hotel man gestured at the window overlooking the street. "That there rumpus outside-it was the young feller beatin' up Ash Burr." Falk goggled at him. "You mean-

"I mean Ash Burr-of the OK." Weller paused, his expression thoughtful. "What's the kid's name? Or didn't he say?"

"Called himself Lane Mory," recalled Falk. "Queer for him to pick

a fight with Ash Burr. Seemed a mild sort of guy."

"I've sent across the street for Ash to come over and tell me what started the rumpus," Luke Weller said. He continued to stare thoughtfully at his companion. "Points East," he mused. "So he told you he was from points East, huh?"

"Well, what of it?" muttered Falk uneasily. "Lots of young chaps drift west looking for jobs punching cows."

"It happens old Owen Keith had a grandson somewhere back East in Boston, or it might have been Philadelphia—or New York."

The lawyer muttered a startled oath.

"You think-"

"Ain't thinkin' nothing for certain yet," grumbled Luke Weller. "All I know is that Owen Keith had a daughter, and I ain't knowin' what her married name was. The name this kid give you don't mean nothing to me, but I'm suspicious of any young feller that turns up in San Carlos."

Falk nodded, put a fresh match to his forgotten cigar. Weller's lazy voice wheezed on.

"We'll have to keep a sharp eye on this Lane Mory hombre. If he turns out to be old Keith's grandson he's sure likely to make us a heap of trouble."

"As bad as that," muttered the president of the new OK Land and Cattle Company. His pale eyes went cold. "We'll have to watch him close. Weller."

"I figger you understand what I'm drivin' at," sneered the hotel man.
"I guess I do," grunted Falk, and added an imprecation. "This

grandson would be Keith's rightful heir—the owner of the OK outfit."

The Buddha-face opposite him nodded grimly.

"He could make it not for us," he said, in his sinister, whispering voice. "If he's sharp, we'd have one tough time makin' our claims stick in the courts."

"We'll have to watch the young chap close," repeated Falk. His tone was vicious. "That old Hally longhorn said something about Keith leaving a grandson when we were talking on the stage. I told him there was nothing in the rumor and that the only heirs were the creditors represented by the new OK Land and Cattle Company." The lawyer frowned in an effort to recall the scene on the stage. "This Lane Mory heard what I said, but he wasn't a bit interested in the talk about the OK. I'd say your worry about him is all for nothing. This Mory kid is no kin of Owen Keith, and the talk about the OK didn't mean a thing to him. He's just some young chap that's come west to be a cowboy."

"Maybe you've figgered right," wheezed Luke Weller. His ferret eyes stared intently at the other man. "And what did Sam Hally say when you talked about these creditors of the OR?"

"Well, he kind of shook his head—said old Cap Keith wasn't the sort of man to owe money."

"Sam's a sharp one," grumbled the hotel man. He wagged his great bald head. "Be too bad for Sam Hally if he aims to get too sharp and nosy." Weller's glance went to the door as the swarthy Manuel glided in, followed by the tall figure of Ash Burr.

The OK foreman looked the worse for his rough-and-tumble encounter with Lane Mory. His chin was gashed, and he flung a look of sullen curiosity from puffy, discolored eyes at the portly stranger opposite Weller.

"What do you want, Luke?" he queried.

"Sit down, Ash," greeted the hotel man. He waved Manuel back to his cutained alcove, and produced another glass from the desk drawer. "Help yourself, Ash. Look like you tangled with a wild bull." Weller's vast body seemed to quiver as though faintly stirred by laughter that was unable to find its way up from the depths to his small, tight libs.

The OK man downed a drink and leaned back in his chair.

"What you want?" he repeated sourly.

"Why, Ash, I'm wantin' to know what started the fight a while back."
"None of yore business, Luke," retorted the foreman. His glance

went suspiciously to Falk. "Who's this hombre?"

"This here gent is the new president of your company, Ash. I told you about him. Mr. Falk aims to practice law, too, in San Carlos." Again the hotel man's silent laughter sent a jelly-like quiver through him. "Mebbe I'll have him do some collectin' for me."

"Huh," grunted Ash Burr. His tone was not flattering. "Reckon you know what you're up to, Luke. Never could figger out the long way round you go to git where you want to go." He gave Mr. Falk an unifriendly look. "All I say is for the gent not to get notions that he can boss things at the OK. I'm runnin' the OK."

Luke Weller lifted his large white hand. "You're some likkered up, Ash," he reproved. "You get too excited. Mr. Falk don't figger to interfere with what you do at the ranch. He is here to 'tend to the

legal end of things-"

"Certainly, Mr. Burr," hurriedly broke in the lawyer. "You may be sure I have no intentions of interfering with you. My work is purely legal—"

"I was askin' you about that rumpus in the street," interrupted Weller smoothly.

"Doggone if I really know," grumbled Ash Burr. "Was talkin' to the Randall gal, an' this hombre—never seen him before—jumped me when I wasn't lookin'." The OK foreman swore. "Would have plugged him proper if Seth McGee hadn't horned in—got the drop on me—"

Again the hotel man's lifted hand silenced him.

"Manuel!" he called sharply.

The Mexican glided up from the alcove.

"Si, senor?"

"You followed, as I ordered?"

"Si, senor. The senorita drove up the street and beckened for the young stranger to follow her around the corner. I told Pinto to watch and bring you word."

Weller nodded approval. Manuel went back to the alcove. Ash

Burr's gaze followed the indolently moving form.

Luke Weller gestured petulantly. "So Lane Mory jumped you when you was talking to Rose Randell, huh?"

"You mean that big young jasper?" Ash Burr scowled. "He'll pay plenty for buttin' in the way he done," boasted the man drunkenly. "Lane Mory, huh? So that's his name!" He tapped the gun in his holster. "I gotta dose of lead for that gent first time we meet ag'in."

"I warned you to go slow with that Randell girl," admonished Weller peevishly. "Take your time with her, Ash. You'll likely scare her away, and I want her here for a mite longer." The hotel man turned his odd eyes at the lawyer. "She owns the Lazy R," he told him. "You savvy what that means, Falk. She's Bill Randall's granddaughter—the one I wrote about."

Falk nodded, cocked his cigar wisely, but made no comment. It was

Ash Burr whose snarling voice answered Weller.

"I'm swinging my rope for that gal, Luke. You keep yore slimy paws off her!? He glowered from swollen eyes. "What you mean with yore side-talk to this here lawyer hombre? What's Rose got to do with the OK business?"

"Don't be a fool," Weller said, in a cold voice. Pin-points of red glowed in his little eyes. "I'm warning you, Ash. Go slow with that

girl, or you'll be in trouble."

The OK foreman subsided. Drink-fuddled as he was, he read a sinister message in those glinting eyes.

There was a scraping sound on the door.

"Pinto," muttered the Mexican from the alcove.

He made his swift, noiseless glide across the room and cautiously pulled the door open, just wide enough for a short, aged Indian to

squeeze through.

Pinto was lumpish in build, and incredibly dirty in the tattered blanket he wore poncho-fashion over his shoulders, his greasy head poked up through a hole in the middle. His face was dull, expressionless, save for a pair of hard glittery eyes under wrinkled, pouchy brown lids.

Manuel addressed him in low, whispered Spanish. The Indian answered at length, his voice a husky, gutteral monotone.

"We have news, senor," the Mexican muttered to Weller.

"What is this news?"

"Pinto say the tall gringo and the Randall girl have talk together on

side-street. They fix for the gringo to go with the senorita to her ranch. She wait for him down where the barranca cross the road while he get his things from hotel. They drive away, Pinto say."

Ash Burr sprang to his feet, his face dark with quick rage.

"I'm ridin' on their trail pronto!" he exclaimed furiously. "No ornery tenderfoot is goin' to horn in on my range—swing his rope at my gal!"

Luke Weller stared at him reflectively. Evidently he approved. He

nodded his great bald head.

"Might be a smart idee, Ash," he said softly. "Take him some place where you can keep him safe. I aim to have a talk with this Mory feller."

4

ROSE SENT THE MUSTANGS at headlong speed through the darkness. She drove with a sureness that amazed the young man by her side.

The high, strong wheels of the buckboard built for coarse sand, rattled noisily over stony, washboard stretches. The road was little more than a vaguely seen track in that vast desert waste. Lane Mory marveled that the girl could keep to its twisting course in the engulfing blackness.

"Let me drive," he suggested.

Rose shook her head. "The moon will soon be up," she said. "I'll let you drive when it's not so dark."

The moon, as predicted by Seth McGee, presently sent down a flood of silver light from the pinnacle of old El Toro. Rose drew the team to a standstill.

"Now," she laughed, "if you still feel you must drive, mister—"
Lane swung out, and the girl slid over to his seat. He climbed in.
Rose handed him the reins.

"Don't pull on them too much," she warned. "The horses won't leave the road unless you jerk too hard on the turns."

"I'll be good," he promised gravely.

They drove on under the lifting moon, the curtain of darkness magically drawn to display a fairyland of lights and shadows.

A vague gray shape slid like a wraith across the road and melted to the moon-mist. A coyote, the girl told the man by her side. She took off her hat and unconsciously relaxed against his hard shoulder.

"We needn't hurry now," she said drowsily. "We've some distance to go yet. The horses are good, but it's a long drag from San Carlos to the Lazy R."

They went jolting along, the mustangs satisfied to take it more

easily; and Rose found an odd comfort in the feel of the hard shoulder. There was a definite strength in the long, lean, and finely drawn body of this Lane Mory, this young tenderfoot who had so nonchalantly beaten the notorious Ash Burr to near insensibility.

Lane Mory possessed more than mere physical strength, reflected the girl. She intuitively sensed a fine moral courage—a spiritual strength—that sheathed him like shining armor. Rose found him comforting. She was needing comfort, the way things were going at the ranch. It was a man's job to save the Lazy R. Perhaps a miracle had brought her the man who could save her—save the old ranch.

A lurch of the buckboard as a wheel struck a deep rut flung her hard against the tall, stalwart frame of her new hired hand. She drew away with a soft laugh and straightened the jaunty white hat that the impact had tilted over one eye.

"You haven't asked about money—how much the Lazy R can pay you," she remarked.

"I'm a tenderfoot," reminded Lane solemnly.

"It's all work and little pay," Rose warned him, "and the pay-days few and far between." Her tone was sober.

"I'm lucky to get the job," he reassured her.

"A hard job, with maybe a little fighting now and then," she warned again. "It's getting cold," she added with a shiver.

At her suggestion he pulled a shabby but warm rug from the back of the seat and tucked it around her knees.

"Yours, too," Rose commanded. "This desert wind bites right through you."

They jolted on across the never-ending moon-drenched landscape, warm and snug under the robe that wrapped them together.

"You don't seem very curious about your job," the girl said suddenly. "I was telling you it won't be an easy job—that you may have some fighting to do. I'm having trouble at the ranch, and several of my riders have been shot—murdered.

"I heard the Lazy R is in a bad way," revealed Lane. "I'm not go-

ing into this with my eyes shut."

She went suddenly tense, and he felt the quick, upward leap of her eyes to his face.

"What do you know about the Lazy R—or me?" The girl's voice was tight, hard with suspicion. "You are a stranger."

"Heard Sam Hally talking to his partner," explained Lane. He skillfully avoided the clutch of a bristling cactus blown from its mooring by some desert gale. "Sam seemed worried."

"Sam doesn't know the half of it," the girl said. She drew a sharp breath. "I haven't the heart to tell him and Seth—make trouble for them." "Make trouble for them?" Lane's tone was questioning.

"I know what they would want to do," Rose smiled faintly. "I can just hear Seth McGee talk. He'd say, 'Sam, it's time me an' you git our guns to smokin'.'" There was a fond note in the girl's low voice.

"Bad as that," muttered Lane thoughtfully,

"Worse," averred Rose. "I daren't tell them what is going on. Sam and Seth are too old to go smoking their guns for me. They've gone through lots of trouble, those two dear old fighting longhorns. I'd rather lose the Lazy R than bring more trouble to their old age." The tenseness had gone from her, and Lane felt the light press of her against blim.

"I was watching you when those OK men rode into the street," he confessed. "Somehow I got the impression you were afraid of them,"

"I am," admitted Rose. "Horribly afraid."

"I was longing to speak to you—ask if I could do something about it," Lane went on. "I was wishing I had got Sam Hally to introduce me."

"You'll make a good cowman," prophesied the girl, with an amused laugh. "I had no idea I was being observed by the tall stranger who had just climbed down from the stage."

"You did notice me, then!" Lane's tone was jubilant,

"Well"—her chin was up—"you were talking to Sam and Seth. How could I help seeing you? I'm not blind." She hid another amused smile. Lane refused to be crushed. "It was a piece of luck," he declared. "I owe those two old longhorns a debt of gratitude." He chuckled. "Why do you say I'll make a good cowman?"

"You are observant-alert," explained Rose. "You need to be on a

cattle range."

"Well"-Lane's tone was dubious-"there is considerable difference

between a cow and a-a nice looking girl."

"I hope so," laughed Rose. "I mean a good cowman must be smart —be able to make sense of the things he sees—read sign, as we say." Her voice sobered. "You read sign those first few minutes of your arrival in San Carlos—knew that I was in trouble, that I was afraid of

Lane suspected she had deliberately swung the conversation back

to the OK foreman. He gave her a sharp look.

"I'll go on reading sign," he said slowly, accepting the subtle challenge in her dark eyes. "I am to infer that the OK outfit is the enemy you mentioned."

The dark head nodded.

Ash Burr and his riders."

"The OK is making serious trouble for the Lazy R," Lane continued. "Some sort of range war, with your Lazy R taking a beating?"

"It's worse than just a range war." Rose spoke in a hard, fierce

voice. She gestured helplessly. "It's not fair—picking on me because I'm a lone young girl."

He waited for her to continue.

"When Owen Keith was alive, and Bill Randall, my grandfather, they were great friends. There never was any trouble between the OK and the Lazy." She gestured again. "After Captain Keith's death things changed at the OK ranch. The old place has become a rendez-vous for the worst sort of border scum—desperadoes." Rose paucky aguely aware of an odd tenseness in the shoulder that cushioned her. "Queer things go on at the OK," she continued. "That is why I warned you not to take a job with that outfit. Sam Hally and Seth McGee suspect the OK is responsible for most of the mysterious rustling that goes on in the Sinks. They warned you, too, you said."

"Sam didn't-or wouldn't-explain what he meant," Lane told her.

"I gather you suspect the OK is rustling Lazy R cattle?"

The dark head nodded again, lifted for a moment. From the distance came the banshee vipping of a coyote. The eerie call suddenly broke

on a high half note.

"Something frightened that coyote," the girl shrewdly surmised. She threw a backward glance into the moon-veiled night. "Hard to tell from his bark where a coyote is prowling. Sounded from some place behind us." Her tone was nervous. "Hope it doesn't mean we are being trailed from town."

"Nobody saw us leave town," scoffed Lane. "I wouldn't worry."

"I don't think we were noticed," mused the girl. "Nobody was around when we talked at the corner—only that old Indian—Pinto, they call him. He's always loafing around in front of the Horsehead Saloon, begging dimes."

Lane returned abruptly to the discussion of the OK ranch.

"You said the trouble is worse than just a range war," he began.
"A range war doesn't mean stealing cows, cowardly killings," the
girl pointed out. "My grandfather was shot from ambush," she added
quietly. "Since his death there have been other killings—Lazy R riders.

all shot in the back."

"And Ash Burr," he prodded gently—"Ash Burr runs the OK?—
is another reason this trouble is worse than a mere range war?"

"He—he wants me," confessed Rose, in a tight little voice. "He—he is a devil, but not the master devil. There's some other man back of all the OK devilry. I don't know he is. Nobody knows."

"I heard Sam Hally mention a grandson," Lane said in a low voice. "Sam told that man on the stage that Owen Keith left a grandson."

"I'm not sure," Rose doubted. "Old Cap Keith was an odd sort, didn't talk about his private affairs. And yet it seems that I remember my grandfather spoke of some boy living East somewhere. Grandfather

Bill Randall was Owen Keith's closest friend," she added, "but they didn't talk much to each other about intimate matters—like family—and things."

"Sam Hally seemed to be absolutely positive," declared Lane.

"It is possible," admitted the girl. Her voice went hard again. Perhaps he is the master devil that is making a hell out of the old OK ranch—a vile and dreadful creature whom old Cap Keith was sahamed to own for a grandson." She glanced up at her companion, was startled to see the grimness there. For a moment there was nothing pleasantly bovish in Lane Morv's face. She spoke again, bitterly, fiercely.

"If there is such a man as this grandson, and he is responsible, I'd like to meet him face to face. I—I'd kill him for what he has done!"

"Perhaps this grandson has known nothing of all this devilry at the OK," argued Lane quietly.

"If there is a grandson, and if he is the rightful owner of the OK ranch, he is either a monster or a weakling," pronounced Rose.

"It seems that way," admitted the young man, in a lifeless tone.

"If he is responsible for all that is going on at the OK ranch I can understand why he would want to hide behind a mask," Rose continued. "A decent, honest man wouldn't allow Ash Burr and his ruffians to so shame the name and memory of old Owen Keith. He would be here looking after things. He'd throw those crooks out on their necks—start his guns smokin', as Seth McGee says."

Again the girl was startled by the grim look she caught on her com-

panion's face.

"The fact that no such grandson has turned up proves he is either dead or there never was a grandson, or that he is a weakling, a coward, and afraid to come and claim his rights," declared the girl.

"Or else he's the monster you have painted," reminded Lane softly.

"The arch-devil behind the scenes."

"The arch-devil," agreed Rose. She smiled up at him faintly. "You will think I haven't been fair to you, offering you a job on a ranch where death lurks behind almost every fence-post. It's not too late to change your mind, mister."

"Thank you, Miss Randall. I'm hanging on to this job until you get ready to fire me." He gave her a boyish grin.

"All right, Lane." The girl spoke soberly. "If you still want to ride for the Lazy R after what I've told you." Her dark lashes lifted at him. "We don't do any mistering on the ranch."

"Suits mc," he assured her. "Lane, or Mory. Anything you like, Miss Randall.

"The boys call me Rose," she smiled. "You might as well get used to it yourself."

"It will come a lot easier," Lane admitted frankly. "It's a right pretty name."

"A rose has thorns, as some of the boys have learned," she reminded

him. There was a hint of warning in her voice.

"I shall remember," promised the young man gravely. "I believe the fact is generally known."

Rose laughed outright, deftly turned the conversation.

"Do you ride, Lane?" she queried. "Know horses?"

"I'm not what you'd call a bronco-buster," he confessed. "I suppose horses are pretty much alike."

"You've got something to learn about horses," laughed the girl.
"Our cow-ponies are rather different from your easy-gaited, well-mannered Eastern equine aristocrats. We take 'em and break 'em, and it's ride 'em, cowboy, or off you go—slam on the hard ground."

"Sounds like a wild, lawless lot," admitted Lane. He chuckled.

"Well, it'll be up to me to stick in the saddle,"

"Our Western stock saddles are not like the little flat things you use in the East," warned Rose. Her tone was mischievous. "You're in for some education, Lane. We've a lot of bad actors in the Lazy R remuda." Her smile teased him. "We'll go easy with you—pick out a few gentle old-timers."

He took the banter good-naturedly, although secretly promising himself an immediate introduction to one or more of the Lazy R "bad actors."

"Gracias, senorita." He spoke solemnly. "I'll do my best not to fall off."

Her eyes widened with pleasure. "Spanish!" she exclaimed delightedly. "That is good, Lane. Spanish is useful out here in the Sinks." Curiosity played in her voice. "How do you happen to be so fluent with Spanish?"

"Picked it up here and there."

Rose saw he was reluctant to confide further, and dropped the subject.

"You might speed up a little," she suggested presently. "We must make time on this flat stretch."

Lane obediently shook the mustangs out of their leisurely walk, and

they went rattling along at a lively pace.

Lane found his thoughts troubling him. He was aware of a growing disay as he grimly speculated on what Rose Randall would say if he told her the truth about himself—told her that she was riding by the side of the man who owned the notorious OK ranch. What would the girl say or do if he told her that Lane Mory was Owen Keith's mysterious grandson?

Lane's face hardened. The girl's story of the mysterious persecution

at the hands of the OK increased the difficulties already confronting him. And yet it was possible that in the role of a tenderfoot cowpuncher on the Lazy R payroll he might best unravel the sinister threads of intrigue that enmeshed the OK ranch and that apparently threatened the neighboring ranch of Bill Randall's granddaughter.

Rose stirred, lifted her dark head.

"Listen!" Alarm sharpened her voice. "I-I hear something."

Lane drew the team to a standstill, while Rose hastily crammed her hat over her curls.

There was no mistaking the sound that came to their straining ears. It throbbed through the silence of the night like the distant muffled beat of drums.

"Horses," said Lane laconically.

The girl looked at him with widened eyes.

"Horses!" she echoed. "Lane-" Her breath quickened.

They stared over their shoulders, probed the moon-sprayed night with anxious eyes. Lane felt the girl's small hand tighten over his arm "See!" She spoke in a frightened whisper. "See there—that ridge—"

A vague, moving shape was suddenly outlined on the reef-like upthrust of rock that sprawled from the hills. In a moment it dropped down the steep slope, vanished into the shadows. Other moving shapes floated like sable-winged vultures over the crest—were lost in the shadows below.

The two in the buckboard slowly turned their faces towards each other. The wide brim of the girl's white hat brushed Lane's chin as her head lifted to him, made him disturbingly aware of a subtle incense from her dark hair. Excitement dilated her eyes. But her voice was cool and steady.

"Ash Burr," she said. "He's picked up the trail. He's after you." She gestured. "Let's get out of here!"

Lane sent the mustangs into a gallop. The buckboard leaped and tossed in the wake of the flying heels like some frail bark in a stormlashed sea.

"No sense in this!" he shouted, above the clamor of hoofs and wheels. "We can't outrun them!"

Rose was clinging desperately to the pitching seat. The pale oval of her face lifted to him. Her lips formed words whipped away by the rushing wind.

"We've got to outrun them!" he hear her cry frantically. "They—they will kill, you, Lane!"

A bullet whined and screamed over the heads of the snorting mustangs. The sharp crack of the rifle was a grim warning that death rode their trail. THE ROAD DROPPED ABRUPTLY to a vast expanse of alkali flats, the bed of a dry lake, white as snow under the moon. It was more than a mile across, and the road straight as an arrow.

Lane swerved the team sharply away from the road and made for a dense growth of mesquite above the left bank of the sink. It was a desperate chance. For all he knew, deadly quicksands lav between them and the protection of the friendly mesquite two hundred vards away. Anything seemed better than the stark revelation of the ancient salt beds.

Rose was sharply watching the bluffs where the wagon tracks made their steep pitch down to the flats. Their pursuers were still on the far side of the bluffs, she encouraged Lane.

"They haven't seen us leave the road yet," she said.

The narrow-rimmed tires of the buckboard ground heavily through the soft alkali, slowed the game little mustangs to a walk. Ten yards separated them from the covering mesquite on the slope above. Lane saw that the exhausted horses would never drag the loaded buckboard up the sandy bank. He sprang out; the girl made a flying leap over the laboring wheels and seized the reins. Each fleeting moment threatened to betray them to the eyes of their pursuers.

Lane put his shoulder to the rear of the buckboard, and, encouraged by the urging cries of the girl, the team went scrambling up the slope with the lightened vehicle.

They came to a standstill behind a thick growth of mesquite. Rose dropped the reins and looked at Lane, breathless against a high wheel. Her own breath was coming in little gasps, and the horses stood with drooping heads and heaving flanks.

"That was close, Lane!" The girl's voice was a breathless whisper. "Listen!"

Enraged yells reached up from the flats.

Lane peered cautiously through the mesquite branches. Rose pressed close to him. The horsemen, five of them, had halted on the slope where the road dipped down to the salt beds. Their puzzled voices came to the watchers-the arrogant tones of Ash Burr.

"Where did they get to so quick?" The OK foreman's voice was bitter with disappointment. "There ain't been time for them to get across the flats by the road."

"Quicksands would have dragged 'em down if they left the road," opined another voice. "It's my bet we passed 'em back in the chaparral."

Lane turned swiftly to the buckboard, and Rose saw that he was

dragging a long rifle from his bed-roll. Her gaze went back to the wrangling horsemen, and suddenly they went streaming up the bank.

"They've gone," she called out to Lane.

He leaned the rifle against a buckboard wheel and began tearing the harness from the mustangs. Rose ran to help him.

"You think fast for a tenderfoot," she said.

"They'll be back," Lane prophesied. "We've got to get away from here."

Rose wanted to tell him about Dry Lake, the deadly quicksands. The man was a dynamo of quiet efficiency. They would have been lost if he had hesitated down there in the treacherous salt beds.

The wrangling voices of the men searching in the chaparral came faintly on the night wind. Rose climbed hastily to the back of one of the horses. It was no time to worry about hampering skirts. Lane gave her an approving smile from the back of his own mustang.

Their progress through the thick growth of mesquite was slow. Each of them was listening tensely for sounds that would warn them their pursuers had found the tell-tale tracks across the alkali bed of Dry Lake. Once those tracks were seen, Ash Burr and his riders would follow like wolves on the trail, would find the abandoned buckboard, and continue the relenties chase.

Rose eye the long rifle curiosly. An old-time Sharps buffalo gun. There was one like it at the ranch. Her grandfather's. Seth McGee had one, too. A queer gun for a tenderfoot, the girl reflected.

"Where did you get that old museum piece?" she finally asked. Lane grinned.

"You might call it an heirloom," he answered. "Some day I'll tell you its history."

They came to an old cattle trail. Rose halted her horse.

"Listen!" she exclaimed. "They've found the buckboard!"

They shook their horses into a last lope and raced side by side across an open stretch of mesa. A small bunch of steers, feeding on the short, dry grass, exploded to life, went crashing into a thicket. Rose worried about the noise made by their flight.

"Those OK men are smart. Every little sound, like those steers stampeding, tells them a story."

"Keep your horse on the run," he urged. "We're not licked—yet."

"Ash Burr won't give up," lamented the girl. Her voice was troubled.
"I—I'm wondering if we should separate. Squint Roan is with them, and he can track like an Indian. I know him. He's a born trailer—used to work for us."

Lane threw her a brief glance.

"I'm not leaving you," he said curtly.

"It's you Ash Burr wants." There was panic in the girl's voice. "Those men won't harm me, but they'll kill you."

He was silent. Rose flung him an admiring look.

"I shouldn't have asked you." Her smile lifted to him, faintly apologetic.

"It was fine of you," Lane reassured her. "I understand."

The trail left the open mesa and plunged steeply into a ravine. It

was a narrow trail, and high cliffs shut out the moonlight. Obeying Lane's gesture, the girl took the lead, her horse moving at a shuffling walk. Speed was not possible. Rose let the mustang pick his own way through the great boulders. From somewhere in front of them came the murmuring song of falling waters.

Lane kept his red mustang close behind the girl, a vague slim shape, gracefully erect. He regarded her with approving eyes. She was all that Sam Hally had claimed. Brave and fine. Not once had she complained. If fears troubled her, they were not fears for herself. Her worry was all for him-his peril at the hands of the pursuing OK men.

She suddenly halted her horse and looked back at him.

"I'm sure I heard them!" Her voice was cool. "Lane, listen!"

The sound reached them faintly—the faraway murmur of drumming hoofs.

"They've struck the mesa trail." Lane's tone was grim. "Squint is a good tracker." He waved her on, and kept his mustang pressing close behind.

The narrow trail took a sharp upward slant, twisted precariously around the bulging brow of a great bluff. The sound of falling waters loudened, shut out the menacing, distant rush of beating hoofs.

"Take it easy," Lane called out to the girl. "That bunch behind us

will have to slow down when they hit the ravine."

Rose lifted a hand to indicate she heard him, and suddenly she again reined her horse. Lane saw her face looking back at him.

"It's getting awfully steep," she told him. "I-I think we'd better finish the climb on foot." Her voice came faintly above the uproar of the unseen falls. "The next turn is awfully narrow-hardly room for a goat. We can't ride it."

He halted close at her mustang's heels and peered over her shoulder. The glimpse he caught of the trail twisting around the turn directly in front of them was appalling. Rose was right. No rider could make that precarious hairpin turn. The jutting cliffs would brush the horse and rider over the precipice.

"Room there for you to slide off?" he asked.

"Yes. That's why I stopped here," came her reply. She spoke coolly. "Just enough room on this ledge."

She slid cautiously from the mustang's back.

"I'll send him on in front of me," she told Lane. "A horse scrambles

so quickly-he'd run me down before I got to the top."

"That's the idea," approved Lane. "Get back here by me." He carefully climbed down from the bald-face and held out a hand. Rose clung to it. He drew her close, and she pressed against him, an arm clinging to his.

Lane spoke quietly, and after a brief hesitation the girl's horse start-

ed cautiously up the slippery trail. The bald-face followed.

They were mustangs, range bred and reared, wise to the perils of hazardous trails. Trim boofs dug carefully into the treacherous shale. "They know as much as we do," admired Lane, when the second

horse scrambled out of sight. "Our turn now."

Rose went up first, Lane at her heels, and suddenly they were around the bend and on the point of the ridge. It sheered out over the moonmisted canyon like the prow of a ship, a triangular, boulder-strewn formation. The roar of the falls lifted from a second gorge that twisted down sharply to the left.

Rose stared at their surroundings curiously.

"I know this place," she declared. "The been up to this point from the Big Anita side." She gestured at the falls. "That's Bear Creek Canyon, and the trail comes out on the Big Anita at Callahan's Crossing." She turned jubilantly to the mustangs. "We can make good time. Lane. The worst is over."

Lane was staring thoughtfully down the trail they had just climbed. Rose looked around at him impatiently. "Hurry, Lane! What are

you waiting for?"

"You ride on," he said. "I'll overtake you."

She stared at him, bewildered. Sounds reached up from the gorge, the beat of hoofs, men's voices.

"Are you crazy" Her tone was sharp. "Every moment means life or death."

He looked at her, leaning on the long rifle. "This makes a good place to argue things with Ash Burr," he told her. He gestured at the narrow trail that twisted up from the gorge. "Only one man at a time can crawl up to the point." Lane smiled contentedly and patted the rifle. "Here's our chance to make Ash Burr sick of this chase."

Rose came closer, the moonlight full on her uplifted face. There was

admiration, a vast respect in her look.

"You think faster than any man I ever knew," she said. "All right, cowboy. I'm letting you be boss tonight."

"Luck is with us," Lane chuckled.

Rose shook her head.

"I'm not so sure that it's all luck." She gave him a wondering look. "I never saw anything so fast as you, Lane. If you had hesitated down

there on the salt flats, we would have been lost. You saw the one chance and took it."

Lane shrugged, lifted his buffalo gun. "We'll let the old-timer speak to 'em. They'll savvy his talk, I reckon." His voice took on an edge. "All right, Miss Rose Randall. You said something about me being boss tonight, so on your way. I'll overtake you down the trail."

"I'm playing the hand out with you," demurred the girl, almost

fiercely. "I don't renege-"

Voices lifted from the depths of the gorge mingled with the tumult of the falls.

"Please!" urged Lane. "No sense you staying here!" His gaze was

fastened on the trail below, the heavy Sharps rifle lifted.
"I'm not leaving you!" Rose spoke crisply, and then her tone took on a plaintive note. "There might be bears down in the canvon."

Lane grunted something, and the long rifle went to his shoulder.

"Don't know about the bears, but here comes a pack of wolves."

His rifle lowered; and he grinned around at her.

"My mistake! Horses! They're sending 'em on ahead, the way we did." He chuckled. "We can use a couple of good horses, with saddles and all."

The horses, five of them, came up with a rush, slid to a snorting standstill on the flats. One of them was a handsome rangy black. Ash Burr's, Lane recognized. There was no mistaking that tall black horse and the sliver-mounted saddle.

"Get a rope on 'em!"

Lane's brief command was needless. The girl had already seized the black horse's bridle and was reaching for the rawhide riata neatly coiled to saddle.

Grumbling voices lifted nearer—curses—a sharp demand for less noise, from Ash Burr. The latter's tall steeple hat pushed around the hairpin turn in the trail. The big Sharps leaped to Lane's shoulder.

"Hold it, Burt!" His voice, ice-cold, lanced through the uproar of the rushing waters. "The trail is closed to you, Burr—closed and locked, with hot lead."

The tall OK man froze in his tracks, flung up a startled look; and, glimpsing the high shape stark against the moonlight, his hand streaked down to holstered gun. Flame belched from the big Sharps buffalo gun, and the crashing thunder of the shot went rocketing from cliff to cliff.

The echoes dwindled to a stupendous stillness. The high shape of the man in the steeple hat swayed, came to a rigid stance on the edge of the narrow ledge.

"I'm holdin' it, feller!" Ash Burr's voice was hoarse with real terror. "No call to pull trigger ag'in."

"I shot high, mister," answered Lane Mory's chill voice. "Another

step and I'll blast you clean to hell! And blast the next man that tries." "Ain't trying to, feller! We ain't comin' no farther on this trail."

"No chance for you to come farther," jibed Lane. "On your way back to your holes, you bunch of wolves!"

The OK foreman attempted to argue.

"Start our broncs back-trailin'," he begged. "You ain't leaving us to hoof it back to the ranch."

"You've guessed it, mister," jeered the man with the Sharps buffalo gun. The ironic laughter in his voice thinned to hard steel. "Get going, Burr, you and your gun-slingers. My trigger finger feels kind of reckless."

The OK man's tall shape shrank behind the outthrust of jagged cliff: and the muttering of voices drifted up to Lane and Rose.

"We got to git our broncs!" frantically declared a high, snarly voice. "We cain't hoof it back to the ranch."

Ash Burr cursed the speaker. His furious voice reached the interested listeners.

"We're giving you the first chance, Squint! Go on up, if you want to take a slug of hot lead in yore chest. Me, I ain't hankerin' to die so quick. An' I'm talkin' turkey to you. That long jasper up there with the gal is shore on the prod!"

There followed another silence, and then the scrape of booted feet as the defeated OK men went profanely down the slippery trail. Lane lowered the long rifle, and his gaze swung to the girl, smiling

coolly at him from the back of an OK horse.

"Our gun-slinging friends are in for a long, long walk," she said contentedly. Her laughter mingled with the falling waters, and she waved a hand at the tall black horse. "He's your size, mister, and that fine saddle of Ash Burr's will never mount a smarter tenderfoot."

TIM HOOK, LONG AND LEAN and leathery-faced, drew his high clavbank horse to a standstill, and stared suspiciously at the buzzard that dropped in narrowing circles into the barranca.

"Somethin' dead down yonder," he surmised aloud to his companion. "That makes three of 'em we've seen flop down into that gully, Lanky."

For a long minute there was a grim silence as the two men watched the big carrion bird drop from sight. It was plain they shared the same grisly thoughts.

"A dead cow, mebbe," Lanky Hull finally said.

"I'm hopin' so," rejoined Tim Hook. "I'm shore hopin' it's only a

dead critter." He thoughtfully made a cigarette and snapped a match into flame across a horny thumbnail. "I reckon we'll ride down yonder an' make shore."

They swung their horses towards the *barranca* and presently were down on the boulder-strewn floor of the dry wash. Ordinarily the presence of buzzards would not have unduly alarmed them, but these were not ordinary times.

With a flapping of wide wings the buzzards lifted heavily, went soaring skyward, and the two Lazy R men reined their horses and gazed sorrowfully at the limp form sprawled face down near a boulder. Beyond the dead man lay a gray horse.

Wordless, Tim and Lanky climbed from their saddles, and with tender hands they turned the lifeless form over and covered the staring eyes with the sometre lying near by.

Bitter rage looked from old Tim Hook's keen gray eyes as he

straightened up from the dead man.

"Shot in the back!" His voice choked. "Pore ol' Hank never had a chance." The Lazy R foreman gestured. "See, Lanky, he hadn't a chance to draw his gun."

"Plain cold-blooded murder," muttered Lanky Hull. His eyes narrowed to glittering slits under frosted bushy brows. "Four of us gone

in six weeks, Tim."

"An' four of us left, not countin' Rose," reminded the foreman grimly. His fierce gaze swept the patches of brush and rock, flung a look that was like a curse up at the wheeling buzzards. There was something about Tim Hook at that moment that made him part and parcel of the wild desert landscape. He was as native as the giant cactus and as savagely indomitable. Tim's nearly seventy years had not bowed his shoulders, and it was his more than sixty years of saddle work, not age, that had put the slight bow in his long, hard-muscled legs encased in faded overalls and brush-scarred chaps. He wore a much-washed gray flannel shirt and a wide-brimmed much-battered Stetson, and his hair and drooping mustache showed a sprinkling of black in the rough badger gray. He stood there over the slain Lazy R rider, booted feet wide apart, a gnarled hand clenched over holstered gun, a heroic figure of an old cowman at bay on his native range, an eternal challenge to the ruthless and cowardly killers.

He spoke a brief word, and Lanky Hull's long .45 roared three times,

blasting that brooding stillness.

Answering shots reached their ears, and presently two riders angled

out of an arroyo, came at a fast lope through the chaparral.

Like Tim Hook and Lanky Hull, the newcomers were grizzled oldtimers. They drew rein and stared down sorrowfully at the dead man. Hank Sells was an old comrade of many a round-up, and now he lay there in the brush, a victim of a cowardly assassin's bullet. Only four of them left now, these four sorrowing old men. They had been with the Lazy R more years than they could remember, and each one of them was ready to fight to the death for the brave young woman who was Bill Randall's granddaughter. They had been Lazy R men before Rose was born. Her fight was their fight.

They rode away presently, with the slain Hank Sells, roped to one the horses. Another rider carried the dead puncher's saddle gear, and Tim Hook himself took charge of the holster with its unfired gun.

Sunset fires touched the mountain ridges when the outfit rode into the ranch yard. Rose saw them from the patio gate, and was suddenly a slim, swift-moving shape that fled through the yellowing sunlight to the corral, where gossamer veilings of dust lifted and drifted.

Tim Hook swung down from his tall claybank horse and turned to the white-faced girl hurrying towards him. He stood there, waiting for her, a high, lean shape in the deepening shadow thrown by the big barn, and his sun-bronzed face was a hard mask. Only his eyes gave a hint of the old foreman's thoughts. There was pity and sorrow in their gray depths, and a certain hard inquiring gleam as his gaze rested briefly on the tall young stranger who came more slowly towards the group in the corral.

Rose was suddenly standing still and staring at the three riders behind Tim Hook. Her gaze flashed over those three grim faces—Lanky Hull, Tule Akers, Ben Roe.

For a moment she stood there, her eyes questioning, and finding the answer without words from these silent men who loved her. The slanting sun touched her face as she gazed at the limp form roped to the led horse, and something glistened on the thick fringe of dark lashes. They forgave her those tears. They were tears that did honor to the passing of a gallant old cowman.

Tim Hook's voice broke the silence.

"Found him in the dry wash below the Honda," the foreman said. His tone grew bitter. "Shot in the back."

"Hank was a good man." Rose spoke softly. "He put me on my first pony."

"A right good hombre, Hank was," murmured Tule Akers from his saddle. Tule was a thin, weazened-faced little man, older even than Tim Hook, but as tough as good rawhide and a fast man with his two ancient guns. "Me an' Hank Sells has rode stirrup to stirrup ever since yore grandpa laid the Lazy R iron on his first longhorn, an' that's a heap o' years," Tule Akers said.

He rode on towards the bunkhouse with the mortal remains of his lifelong friend. Lanky and Ben followed him; and, after a moment, Tim Hook's gaze swung inquiringly to the tall stranger standing behind the girl.

"Who's this hombre, Rose?" There was doubt in the old foreman's

look and tone. "What's he doin' here?"

"Lane"—the girl's faint smile went over het.shoulder—"this is Tim Hook, your boss. Tim is my boss, too," she added. "He's been foreman of the Lazy R as long as I can remember."

"Was foreman before you was born," Tim put in, staring hard at

Lane Mory.

The latter saw mounting doubt in the keen eyes that raked him

from head to toe, and Rose sensed the veteran foreman's perturbation, too.
"Lane Mory is all right. Tim." she assured him. "Lane knows Sam

"Lane Mory is all right, Tim," she assured him. "Lane knows Sam Hally and Seth McGee. He came in with them on the San Carlos stage."

Tim brightened a trifle, and his drooping moustache lifted in something like a brief smile. "Waal, that sounds better," he conceded. "You know how things are with us these times, Rose. I'm set ag'in hirin' a stranger to ride for this outfit, but if you claim he's a friend of Sam an' Seth. I reckon the young feller is all right, like you say."

Lane gave the girl an embarrassed look. He was not quite pleased at the stress she laid on his friendship with the HM partners, and was about to explain the chance meeting on the San Carlos stage. Her expression warned him, tied his tongue.

"I've a lot to tell you, Tim," she broke in quickly. "You were not here when—when we got in from town. Teresa said you and the boys were still out on the range somewhere, looking for—for poor Hank—" Her voice broke.

"We stayed the night at the Honda Creek camp," exclaimed the foreman. He cogitated for a moment, his thoughts evidently busy with some ranch business. "Did you bring them supplies we was needin' for the Honda camp, Rose?" he went on. "I'm sendin' Tule an' Ben back that tonight, an' they'll be needin' grub for a week. Got to comb them canyons above the Honda for that bunch o' three-year-old steers. Should be in good shape for shippin' by now."

"I got the supplies from Frake's," Rose informed him quietly. She made a tragic gesture. "They're back on the road some place, Tim."

"What you mean?" The foreman stared at her with worried eyes.

"I said I wanted to tell you about last night," Rose answered, "It was pretty bad, Tim." Her faint smile went again to Lane. "Ash Burr got ugly with me in town, and Lane gave him a beating, and then Ash Burr and his gang chased us. We had to leave the buckboard in the brush and make a bareback ride as far as the head of Big Bear, and

then Lane took their horses away from Ash and his bunch, and they couldn't chase us any more."

The old foreman's face was a study as he listened to the story.

"Took their broncs, huh?" he finally chuckled. "Set 'em a-foot, huh?" He gave Lane Mory a look in which was a blend of respect and firendliness. "That was a smart play, young feller." His big, hard hand went out. "I reckon we shore can use an hombre like you in this outfit, mister."

"I'm what you'd call a tenderfoot," confessed Lane.

Tim Hook grinned. "I'm likin' yore breed of tenderfoot," he declared.

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"A MAN TO RIDE the river with," Tim Hook said.

"I reckon them words stand, Tim," declared Lanky Hull. "Yuh

couldn't say more, an' I can back up that statement."

"Stubborn as a mule, an' shore a hombre to argue when he was likkered," muttered Ben Roe, "but he never cheated no man nor woman. He played the game fair an' square. Yore words stand with me. Tim."

Something like a groan came from Tule Akers. The weazened-faced little puncher rocked on his high bootheels, hands clenched tight over the butts of the long six-runs. clamped to his thighs.

"Adios, partner," he whispered. "I'll be seein' you when I've done squared things with the coyote that got yuh. Me an' you has rode circle a heap of years, an' we'll shore meet thar—at the last round-up."

Moonlight filtered through the trees, and the night was very still only those husbed voices bidding *adios* to a departed comrade, the sound of falling earth.

Rose turned away with a stifled sob. Another loyal friend at rest by the side of his slain comrades. Four Lazy R men now laid away in

their graves since the murder of her grandfather.

Somebody was suddenly by her side—Lane Mory. She clung to his arm, vaguely aware of an odd comfort in him, and in silence they made their way through the darkness towards the softly gleaming lights of the old ranch-house.

They went through a rustic gate of willow wood, and down a path that wound through tall, whispering trees; and suddenly they were approaching the rectangle of light made by the open doorway.

Rose paused by the porch steps, and the unobstructed moonlight

played softly on her uplifted face.

"Thank you, Lane," she said simply. "Good—good night. I'll see you in the morning." Her low voice steadied, and he saw that she was making a desperate effort to keep her courage undaunted. "There is much

to talk about," she said. "You must know what you'll be up against." With a grave little smile she went quickly into the house, and the rectangle of vellow lamplight was blotted out as the door closed behind her.

Lane went with slow feet across the yard to a small log-house set deep in the shadows of two huge chinaberry-trees. Tim Hook and his wife had occupied the place for years, but since the death of the girl's grandfather they had lived in the big ranch-house. Tim's wife, Nora, was considerably younger than the veteran foreman, a motherly women, and devoted to Rose.

The log-cabin consisted of three rooms, a living-room, a bedroom, and a kitchen. The living-room was spacious, with a stone fireplace, and was still used by Tim as his ranch office. The place was littered with ranch equipment, saddles and bridles, a rack of rifles, and in one corner a wide, home-made desk and a battered wooden chair.

A lighted lamp was on the desk, from which Lane guessed that the foreman would be in again. He passed into the adjoining bedroom and lit the small lamp on the dresser. It was a comfortable room, with simple home-made furniture. Lane shrewdly suspected that Rose knew the place was better suited to him than the bunkhouse. His presence in the bunkhouse would have irked the three old-timers. He was a new man, a stranger, and these old men had reason to be wary of a stranger. Lane blessed the girl's wisdom in assigning him to the solitude of the log-house.

He sat down on the edge of the bed and reflectively made a cigarette. Excepting the big Sharps rifle leaning against the wall, and the .45 in his holster, his personal effects were in the bed-roll left with the abandoned buckboard. Tim Hook had intimated an immediate trip to salvage the buckboard and the supplies needed for the Honda camp. Lane was reasonably certain that Tim would want him to make one of the salvage crew. Nobody else would know where to look for the buckboard

Lane's face was a hard, grim mask as he pondered unhappily over the strange happenings of the past weeks. His thoughts went back to that morning in his law office in New York when he opened the long box expressed from a remote border town in New Mexico. It was the first time he had heard of San Carlos, or laid eyes on the ancient Sharps rifle that confronted his astonished gaze. There was a message, scrawled with a blunt lead pencil on a torn piece of brown wrapping-paper tucked in the trigger guard.

Lane's gaze swung to the long buffalo gun leaning against the wall, and after a moment he got up from the bed and took the rifle into his hands. A silver plate bound the butt. A press of his thumb sprung a

catch, and the plate snapped open, revealing a small chamber inside the heavy walnut stock.

He sat down on the bed again and from the old gun's secret repository he drew out a tightly folded sheet of brown paper. Something like a grin relaxed the stern set of his jaw as he scanned the pencilled scrawl.

Yore grandpop was fixin to send for you but dide to quick so I send you the sharps like i promis him with the leter he rote hid in the stock, squeeze top and the silver plate will open, keep mum bout me riting you. Things is bad as hell here at the OK and them hombres will kill me if they git wise. Keep yore eyes peeled for Cimarron Smith uv the OK, i bin a year gettin yore trail and if you dont come on the jump thar wont be no OK left for you to boss. Take it easy and play fox or you wont live long and bring vore shootin irons.

There was no signature, but it was obvious that the writer was Cimarron Smith himself, and equally obvious that Cimarron Smith was

a very worried cowboy.

There were other folded sheets of paper tucked inside the gun's secret chamber. Lane carefully extracted them. He knew their contents by heart. One was the last will and testament of the grandfather he had never known, his mother's father, Owen Keith, owen of the vast OK cattle ranch. Owen Keith had found it hard to forgive his daughter when she eloped with the young New Yorker. She had sent him a note telling him of the birth of his grandson, but it was not until after she and her husband met death in a railway accident a few years later that the proud cattle baron surrendered to the yearnings of his heart and attempted to find the little boy who was his grandson. The quest had been futile. Lane's spinster aunt had grown to hate the man who had disowned her brother's wife. Owen Keith's letters remained unanswered, and Lane Mory grew to young manhood without knowledge of the grandfather who yearned to make amends.

All these things were written in the long letter attached to the will.

Doc Norton says my time is up [the old cattleman wrote].

Since my illness I've lost my grip on things at the ranch. There is a man here who aims to get the OK away from me. I'm being watched, and old Cimarron Smith is the only man I can trust. He's old, but he's a hundred per cent man, and you can trust him to the limit. I've given him your last address and told him what to do if I cash in my chips before I hear from you that you are coming. I need you, grandson. God forgive me for the wrong I did your mother and you. . . .

Lane thoughtfully restored the papers to the niche in the rifle stock and snapped shut the silver plate. Owen Keith had died before he could realize his wish to find his long-lost grandson, and it taken a year for old Cimarron Smith finally to "git" on his trail. He had obeyed the warning to be cautious. He had purposely kept secret his identity, his reason for coming to San Carlos. Things were obviously very wrong at the OK ranch, and he wanted to look the ground over. His grandfather had hinted of an unnamed enemy who plotted to gain possession of the ranch, and old Cimarron Smith had cautioned him to "play fox" if he wanted to keep living. The warnings had been timely, Lane reflected grimly. The happenings of the past thirty-six hours since he had climbed down from Pop Slocum's dusty stage were proof of dangerous days ahead. Death lurked for the man who rashly claimed to be Owen Keith's grandson and the owner of the great Keith ranch.

Footsteps broke through the night's stillness, the low murmur of voices. Lane replaced the Sharps rifle against the wall. The old gun was not the safest repository in the world for those precious documents. He must, he decided, find a more secure hiding-place. Unfortunately there was no bank in San Carlos, and the thought of entrusting the papers to the care of Luke Weller's big hotel safe had not appealed to him. Again Lane's thoughts turned to old Sam Hally. He would, at the first opportunity, lodge the proofs of his identity with the HM partners for safekeeping.

The crunch of boot-heels drew up to the door of the log-house. Tim Hook, long and lean, came wearily into the ranch office and slumped into the battered desk-chair. Close on his heels followed the three grizzled riders. Lane got up from the bed and sauntered into the office. It was in his mind that the foreman would want him to go for the abandoned buckboard. He paused in the doorway, vaguely aware of a thinly veiled hostility in the four pairs of eyes that swung to him. "We've been wonderin' about you, young feller," Tim Hook said

bluntly, "The boys figger Rose an' me is some hasty, puttin' you on

the Lazy R payroll."

"It's like this, mister," broke in Lanky Hull gruffly, "We ain't knowin' who you be or whar you hail from."

Ben Roe nodded, thick, gnarled fingers clawing at drooping, grizzled moustache. "That there is the dog that's bitin' us," he said thinly. "You're a stranger to us, an' we ain't carin' for strangers around the Lazy R."

"What's the trouble?" Lane's face reddened, "What are you driving

"The boys figger they don't want you with the outfit," explained Tim Hook mildly.

"Miss Randall hired me," Lane pointed out. He smiled amiably at the glowering faces. "She must be the one to fire me," he finished.

"Leave the gal outer this!" It was the high, furious voice of Tule

Akers speaking, and there was a wicked glint in his eyes. "We aim to pertect her from pullin' off fool plays. She's only a young gal an' don't know how to size up a man."

Lane's glance traveled from face to face, read growing doubt in the unwavering eyes of these loyal Lazy R men. He could not really blame them for their doubts. He was a stranger to them. For all they knew he was another spy from the enemy camp. Tim Hook spoke slowly.

"Yore talk about knowin' Sam Hally an' Seth McGee don't mean so much," he pointed out. "It's only yore say-so. Sam an' Seth ain't here to back yore say-so." The old foreman hesitated. "What you done for Rose was mighty fine, but that wouldn't mean you ain't hooked up with the OK outfit."

"You mean that I might be an OK spy?" Lane's tone was chill.

"That's saying a lot, Mr. Hook."

There was a silence, broken by Tule Akers' high voice. "I reckon you come close to a bull's-eye, Tim," he said. "The play was framed so this hombre could make a hit with Rose-git him a job with the Lazy R-"

"You're crazy!" Lane glared at the runty cowboy.

"Crazy like a fox!" snarled Tule. There was a scrape of leather and suddenly his .45 was menacing the tall tenderfoot lounging in the doorway. "Reach for the roof, mister, an' step away from that door."

The dumbfounded young man obeyed in silence. There was no doubt-

ing that look in the little cowboy's eyes. "Lanky"-there was a triumphant note in Tule Akers' voice-

"thar's a Sharps gun leanin' against the wall in that room. Go git it while I keep this snake petrified."

Lanky Hull's long bow legs moved swiftly. The others heard him mutter an exclamation, and in a moment he was back in the office, the

long rifle in his hands.

There was an ominous silence. From the far distance faintly came the challenge of a range bull, the eerie yipping of a coyote that fell upon poor Lane Mory's ears like the ironic laughter of some desert clown. He saw by their shocked faces that these men were no strangers to the long buffalo gun in Lanky Hull's freckled hands. Their eyes swung up to him, rife with suspicion. Tule Akers laughed.

There was a deadly note in that short, grim, mirthless sound.

"Awful familiar, ain't it, fellers?" he observed, "Was purty shore I knowed that gun leanin' up to the wall."

"Cap Keith's ol' Sharps," muttered Tim Hook. His face had paled, and he stared at Lane with shocked eves.

"Ol' Cap Keith's Sharps," affirmed Ben Roe, in his heavy voice. "Seen it a heap of times."

Lane saw that he stood convicted in the eves of these men. They

were in a dangerous mood. They had just buried an old comrade, foully slain by an assassin's bullet. It was not unthinkable that in a few minutes he would be swinging from the end of a rope. Tule Akers especially was yearning for a swift vengeance. Hank Sells had been his close saddlemate. There was no mistaking the meaning of that ugly gleam in the quick-tempered little compuncher's eyes. He forced himself to speak coolly.

"Let's talk this thing over," he said. "You men are jumping the wrong way."

wrong way.

Tim Hook nodded.

"Git his gun, Ben," he said quietly. "We'll listen to what he has to say before we take a vote."

The heavy-shouldered Ben deftly removed Lane's Colt.

"All right, young feller." Tim's tone was judicial. "You kin put yore hands down an' speak yore piece."

Lane forced a grin and lowered his hands. Now was no time to betray his uneasiness. They were watching him intently, these grim, hard-eyed oldtimers. He leaned against the wall and nonchalantly made a cigarette. His fingers were steady, he observed with some satisfaction.

"We're waitin', mister." The grizzled foreman spoke thinly,

"You men are barking up the wrong tree," Lane said. He smiled at them. "If I were an OK spy, would I come here carrying a rifle you'd be sure to recognize?"

"A fool tenderfoot might do anything," jibed Tule Akers.

Lane seized on this. "Would the OK outfit send a fool tenderfoot to spy on you?" he shot back.

The four Lazy R men exchanged dubious looks, and Tim Hook shook his head. "I reckon it don't make good sense for them buzzards to pull off a fool play like that," he admitted. His tone hardened. "It figgers up like this; you're carryin' ol' Cap Keith's rifle, and we aim to know whar you got that gun."

"We're wastin' time," grumbled Tule Akers. He glanced significantly at a coiled lariat hanging on a peg on the wall. "No sense listenin' to

this hombre's lies."

"I take it I'm being tried for my life?" Lane's voice was cool, and he flicked a faint smile at the little gun-fighter.

"Yore guess is good," was Tule's grim response.

Lane reflectively pinched out his cigarette. He could tell them of the papers concealed in the stock of the Sharps. He abandoned the thought. These men would be certain to regard him as the unknown shirer mind responsible for all their troubles. Revealed as the owner of the OK ranch, he would stand convicted in the eyes of these sorely harassed men.

"Miss Randall has a right to sit on this jury," he temporized.

Tim Hook shook his head. "I reckon not," he said slowly. "I reckon we don't need to trouble Rose about this business, mister. Rose has plenty trouble."

"Sam Hally," suggested Lane desperately. "Sam and Seth-"

There was an impatient snort from Tule Akers that drew a quick frown from the foreman.

"I'm bossin' this show, Tule," he said curtly.

"Give me a chance to talk to them," urged Lane.

"I reckon we can do that," finally assented Tim. "We aim to be fair. It's due you to have the chance to talk to Sam and Seth. Them two hombres is square-shooters, and they think a heap of Rose,"

Ben Roe and Lanky Hull nodded reluctant agreement, Only Tule

Akers protested.

"We've just buried pore Hank," he reminded darkly. "I vote we set this hombre dancin' on air pronto." The runty puncher's eyes flamed. "I'm in a killin' mood," he proclaimed, in his high, deadly voice. "Thar's dead men layin' out vonder callin' for blood."

Tim Hook sighed, got up slowly from the creaky chair, and took down the coiled lariat from the wall. Lane's spine prickled, and he drew

a sharp breath. The old foreman's gaze went to him.

"I'm giving you a chance, young feller," he said gravely. "You can't blame the boys for not likin' this business. It seems mighty fishy you won't come clean about that Sharps." His tone was grimly final. "We'll let Sam and Seth set in on this case like you want."

"That's fair enough." Relief flowed through Lane, yet left him oddly limp. He forced a grin. "No need to tie me up."

"Lock him in the granary," suggested Lanky Hull. "Two-inch planks

in them walls, and no window he can crawl through," Tim replaced the rope on the peg. "I reckon that's a good idee," he

agreed. "Look him over careful. Ben, for matches or a knife."

Ben's quick but thorough search produced a box of matches and a small pocket-knife, and Lane found himself walking across the moonlit vard towards the long barn. At his heels tramped the Lazy R men with drawn guns. He tried to comfort himself that a night in the granary was decidedly better than dangling from one of the tall trees now throwing long shadows across the moon-silvered landscape. A light gleamed from an upper window of the ranch-house. Rose Randall's room, Lane guessed. He wondered what she would say if she knew what was happening to him. Perhaps Rose too would regard him as a vile hireling of the enemies who sought the destruction of the Lazy R.

A low, squat building loomed in front of him. Tim Hook inserted a

key in the padlock and swung open the heavy door.

"Seems kinda rough on you, young feller," he said gruffly. "We ain't takin' chances, and you can't blame us."

The young man gave him a bitter look,

"I do blame you, Tim," he said briefly, and stepped into the yawning blackness. The door slammed shut, closed out the moonlight. Lane heard the scrape of key in lock, the crunch of bootheels fading into the night.

8

LANE STOOD FOR LONG MOMENTS, listening to those departing footsteps.

The night grew still. He could have heard the fall of a pin. It was with a sense of relief that he caught the eerie note of a coyote from some distant hill far from the confines of that tomb-like grain shed.

His eyes strained through the wall of blackness. Something seemed to glimmer at him, a soft, pale gleam scarcely larger than the size of a small silver coin.

He continued to stare intently, and with a swift quickening of hope that held him breathless. What he saw was monolight filtering through a chink in the wall, a small knothole in the pine timber. That tiny beam seemed to Lane like a star beckoning from a dark horizon. Hope flowed through him like fire, and he moved forward cautiously, hands stretched out to feel for obstructions. Something solid reared up in front of him, a tier of sack grain that blotted out the precious moonbeam. He drew back, raked the opposing blackness with desperate eyes. Again he caught the gleam of pale silver, and this time he moved inch by inch, gaze fastened on the beckoning light as he rounded the barrier of grain.

The knothole was some three feet above the floor, between two tiers of bulging grain bags. Lane knew that sheer luck had brought him that first glimpse of the tell-tale moonbeam. He went down on his heels and pressed his mouth to the ragged cleft in the rough, splintery board and gulped in deep breaths of the fresh night air.

He relaxed, content for the moment, and enjoying a blissful sense of freedom from the stifling horror of his dungeon. He had scored a first victory in gaining to fresh, pure air, even though the grain-shed walls still held him a prisoner.

Presently he tentatively explored the knothole with probing fingers. A piece of the dried, warped wood broke away. He set to work in earnest. The larged fragments came away with tiny crackling reports

that sounded deafeningly loud to his alarmed ears. He grinned at his nervous fears. The bunkhouse was a good two hundred yards away, and by this time Rose Randall's loyal if misguided elderly retainers would be sound asleep. He fervently hoped they were.

Lane sat back on his heels and stared reflectively at the enlarged hole. A small-sized cat could squeeze through, but not a wide-shouldered man who stood five inches over six feet in his boots. No chance for escape unless he could pry off that tough plank. A crowbar inserted in that knothole would do the trick, a few gentle heaves would loosen the nails.

He thumbed gloomily in his pocket for cigarettes, recalled with a wry grin that Tim Hook had been careful to confiscate his matches and knife. He crushed the cigarette back into his pocket, wondering vaguely if a search through the blackness behind him might discover a lever stout enough to dislodge the board from its fastenings. He must make his escape before the first glimmer of dawn, Lane decided grimly. The Lazy R men would be making an early start. Tim Hook would plan to salvage the abandoned buckboard for the supplies needed at the Honda camp. They were working cattle at the Honda camp, and his own affair would not be allowed to hinder serious ranch business. No telling what new menace the new day would bring to the prisoner in the grain shed. The approaching dawn might find even Tim Hook in agreement with the fiery Tule Akers that the simple solution would be a rope and a tree for the stranger caught red-handed with old Cap Keith's Sharps rifle.

It was a chilling thought, Lane glowered at the narrow ribbon of moonlight silvering through the jagged knothole. Rose would never know what had happened. She would know only that he had mysteriously vanished in the night.

A faint stir outside stiffened him to instant attention. A long, thin shadow fell across the ribbon of moonlight.

Lane put his eyes close to the open space in the board. The shadow of a man, creeping up on almost soundless feet. His heart sank. Tim Hook had slylv set a watch on him.

The soft scrape of cautious feet drew nearer. The man was hugging close to the wall, bent low in a curious crouch, as betrayed by the shadow that moved across Lane's vision. The latter suddenly glimpsed a ragged gray moustache under a long, bony nose, and a pair of sharp eyes that held a friendly grin even while they cautioned.

It was not a face Lane had ever seen before. For some reason his fears vanished. He grinned back, waited for his mysterious midnight caller to do the talking. "Was waitin' for them fellers to start sawin' wood afore I dast make a move," whispered the stranger.

Lane maintained his silence, his eyes busy. He could make out the man's face more distinctly as his visitor squatted on boot-heels in front of him. A lined, leathery face under an ancient, wide-brimmed hat. The weathered visage of an oldtimer of the cattle range.

"Was prowlin' around yonder, waitin' for a chance to see you private, when the boys jumped you for an OK coyote." The old man paused for a cautious glance over his shoulder. "Saw 'em lock you up, but couldn't do nothin' till they was asleep," he resumed in his low horse whisper. An admiring grin wrinkled the seamed face. "Done heerd you clinkin' at the knothole an' figgered yore play. I'm buyin' chips you're plenty smart, mister."

"It's my guess that you're Cimarron Smith," Lane said coolly, and keeping his voice to a low whisper.

"Shore!" There was a low chuckle. "Cimarron Smith, as writ you the letter in Cap Keith's ol' Sharps."

"I've got to get that rifle back," Lane said grimly. "I'll need those papers."

"Shore," repeated Cimarron Smith. "Right now I reckon we've got to give you outer this doggone calaboose." His tone grew businesslike. "Hold yore broncs a spell, son. I got just what's needed spotted."

He slid like a wraith into the darkness. Lane waited, his heart pumping. Again the thin, long shadow slipped across his vision. Cimarron Smith was back, a piece of broken wagon-tongue in his hands. Stout and tough, with ample leverage. He inserted an end into the broken knothole and bore gently and slowly down, to avoid the sudden squeak of too quickly drawns nails. It required the loosening of two boards before Lane could squeeze through.

"Thanks, Cimarron," were his first words. He held out a hand.

Cimarron Smith chuckled softly. "Glad to meet you, Lane." He wagged his head. "Thar's a job 'o work waitin' for you over at the OK, an' I'm glad you got here at last. Like I done writ you, hell's plumb broke loose on yore ol' granpop's ranch."

"I'm riding with you now," Lane confided. His shoulders straightened, and he drew in a deep breath of fresh air. "First thing, I want my forty-five back, and the Sharps. I think I know where to look for them."

The old cowman gazed up at him with approving eyes.

"Doggone!" he muttered. "You're bigger than ol' Cap Keith. I figger you'll fill his boots an' no mistake, son. Yore granpop would

have been mighty tickled to have met up with you."

"I'm only a tenderfoot, Cimarron," reminded the young man. He

was listening tensely for danger signals.

"Cowmen are born, not made," was old Cimarron's dry comment.
"You're born that way, mister." He drew one of his low-slung guns.
"Better take this till you git yours back. May be needin' it."

The two men went silently through the darkness, across the yard,

towards the little log-house.

The moon rode down the western slope, touched the landscape with frost that the trees laced with long shadows.

Lane halted in the dense gloom of the big chinaberry-trees clustered around the ranch office.

"You keep watch," he told his companion.

He was fervently hoping that Tim Hook had not taken the Sharps into the big house. He had seen it last where Lanky Hull had placed it, against the wall by the foreman's desk.

The door was not locked. Lane pushed it open slowly and paused for a look over his shoulder. He could barely see the vague form of Cimarron Smith crouched against the trunk of a chinaberry. Beyond, nearer the network of corrals, was the bunkhouse. No glimmer of light there—no sound. His gaze swung to the ranch-house, looming dark through the high trees. Reassured, he pressed into the deeper blackness of the room.

For a few moments he could see nothing. Little or no moonlight managed to penetrate the dense foliage of the chinaberry-trees. He was forced to wait, impatient and apprehensive, while his eyes accustomed themselves to the pitch blackness. Gradually objects took vague shape— —the desk under a window, the long outline of the rifle against the wall.

Lane moved on quick, silent feet. His .45 lay on the desk. He holstered it, and with a grin scooped up the confiscated matches and the pocket-knife. Tim Hook had been too sure, he reflected grimly. The foreman was due for a surprise.

In a few moments he rejoined Cimarron at the chinaberry-tree. The old man took a brief glance at the long rifle in Lane's hand.

"Found yore Sharps, huh? Good work, son." His tone was pleased. "Next play is to git a bronc an' fan it away from this place."

Silently they moved across the moonlit yard, careful to hug the shadows wherever possible, and soon they were skirting the rear of the grain shed. The gloom was dense here, and fifty feet would take them across the small horse corral to the stable.

"Listen!" Cimarron Smith whispered suddenly. He froze to a standstill, lean, wiry form hugged the building.

Lane's straining ears caught the faint scrape of bootheels approaching from the bunkhouse. He dared a cautious look around the corner. drew back with a smotherd exclamation.

"Tule Akers," he whisperd to his companion.

"Figgers to make shore the prisoner ain't busted out of the calaboose," mutterd the old man peevishly. "Doggone the luck!"
"A look at the door will satisfy him," Lane said. "Good thing we

didn't jimmy the lock."

The crunching bootheels drew close. Old Cimarron loosened his guns. Lane had returned him the borrowed Colt. "I know that hombre." grumbled the old man. "Tule Akers don't leave a job half done. He'll be nosin' around all four sides o' this shed, an' that means plenty hell when he finds them boards broke out.

The crunch of booted feet hushed. Tule was evidently scrutinizing the securely locked door.

"We gotta git that dang wildcat," muttered old Cimarron. "Gotta git him afore he kin squawk."

They drifted back, crouched low behind a long water trough. Lane

laid the buffalo gun on the ground and drew his .45, "We cain't do no shootin'." warned his companion. "Have the hull

dang outfit on our tails." Lane nodded. His face was grim. It was hard lines on the loyal little Lazy R puncher, but there seemed no other way. Tule must not be given the chance to sound the alarm.

Again they heard the crunching feet. Cimarron had guessed truly. Tule was making a complete circuit of the shed. He was suddenly standing at the corner, staring at the ripped-out boards. The sound of swiftly leaping feet spun him around, hand dragging at his gun.

"Hated to treat him so rough," regreted Cimarron a moment later. "He'd have let out a vell if I hadn't given him a doggone good tap.."

Lane eved down at the limp form. "You knocked him cold," he worried

"Ain't much hurt," declared Cimarron. He holstered his gun, stared down thoughtfully at the prone Lazy R man. "Gotta tie him up goodfix him so he won't yell when he comes to his senses." He drifted away and was soon back with a length of light rope.

"Found it in the hay-wagon whar I got that piece o' wagon-tongue from," he explained.

In a few moments the unconscious puncher was expertly tied hand and foot.

"Gotta tie the hombre's mouth up good," decided Cimarron.

Lane started to protest, was suddenly aware Tule was staring up at them with wide-open and shocked eyes. In an instant he was on his knees. The yell that rose in Tule's throat died away to a low gurgle. Lane's hand tightened over the puncher's mouth.

"Ouick!" he implored. "He's trying to chew my fingers!"

The old OK man chuckled softly. "Told you I hadn't hurt the lil' cuss," he said. His own hands were busy, ripping a long strip from Tule's shirt.

They left the Lazy R man lying bound and gagged behind the grain shed and went swiftly to the barn. Cimarron appraised the horses with the eves of an expert.

"That thar claybank looks like he's got plenty speed," was his verdict. "He's big, an' a hombre yore size needs a big bronc."

"That's Tim Hook's horse," objected Lane.

"We ain't got time to fuss about who owns him," Cimarron said gruffly. He yanked saddle and bridle off a peg. "I'll tote the gear. We'll saddle up down in the barranca whar I left my bronc hid."

Lane's smile was grim as he loosed the tie-rope and led the claybank out at the old man's heels. He was stealing a horse, and Tim Hook's pet mount at that. His one hope now was to get Sam Hally and have the matter adjusted before the incensed Lazy R men hanged him for a horse-thief.

Old Cimarron moved swiftly for all his years, and soon they were in

the deep ravine where the OK man had hidden his own animal. Lane saddled and bridled the claybank and swung up. "We'll ride a piece afore we do any talkin'," Cimarron said. "I crave

"We'll ride a piece afore we do any taikin'," Cimarron said. "I crave to git far away from this doggone place. Thar'll be hell to pay come dawn. Them Lazy R rannihans will be plenty peeved."

They pushed on rapidly down the barranca. Cimarron took the lead

until they came to a small stream. Lane pulled up.

"The stirrups are too short," he complained. He swung down, set to work on the leathers. His companion made a cigarette, amusement in his eyes as he watched.

"You'll be gettin' a name for horse stealin'," he commented finally. "Makes two brones you've run off with since you hit San Carlos." "You mean Ash Burr's black was the other one?" Lane shook his

"You mean Ash Burr's black was the other one?" Lane shook his head. "The circumstances were different," he pointed out. "I was forced to take those OK horses in self-defense."

"Reckon it ain't much different this time," argued Cimarron. "It

was take a bronc or be in plenty trouble."

Lane thought of Rose. "Î don't know, Cimarron," he said bitterly. "Tim Hook and—and the others—will call it plain horse-stealing."

"Ash Burr and the boys claim yuh're a horsethief," chuckled the old man. "They was as mad as hornets when they come trompin' in to the home ranch all foot-sore an' dog-weary." His tone sobered. "It was hearin' them talk an' cuss you out that give me the notion that ol' Cap Keith's grandson had come to town. That's what brung me

snoopin' around the Lazy R tonight."

"Lucky for me you came," Lane said laconically. "I'm going to Sam Hally's place. The best thng you can do for me right now is to put me on the trail for the HM ranch."

The OK man pricked up his ears. "You're knowin' Sam and Seth?" Relief was in his voice, "That thar's good news, Lane, Them pair o'

longhorns is friends to tie to, I'm explodin' to tell you."

"I've an idea those two are worried about Rose Randall and the goings-on at the OK," Lane confided. He tapped the long buffalo gun. "I've an idea these papers and your letter will convince them that Owen Keith's grandson has come to town, as you said."

"Thar's a short cut to the HM leadin' out of Callahan's Crossin'." The old man's voice was jubilant. "I kin git you started, an' then I must hightail it pronto back to the OK. Ain't wantin' Ash Burr wonderin' why I ain't on the job in the kitchen, come mornin'." Cimarron gave his tall companion an abashed look, "I'm cook thar these days," he confessed. "Ash figgered to fire me 'cause I'm old. I talked him into stayin' on as cook. You see, I'd promised Cap Keith to stick by the place an' git word to you, like I done,"

They rode on in silence for a few minutes; and suddenly they caught

the gleam of the Big Anita. Lane broke the silence.

"I've got hopes you can explain a lot of things to me, Cimarron. You know what's going on at the OK, and you probably know who is back of the trouble there, and why the OK is making hell for Rose Randall."

"I shore do, son," admitted the veteran gruffly. "I kin tell you things that'll s'prise you plenty. I gotta good notion who's back o' the hell that's goin' on."

"Who is it?" Lane's tone was grim. "Whom do you suspect, Cimarron?"

A streak of fire lanced from the cliffs across the narrow stream, followed by the crash of a rifle. Even as the report rocketed from cliff to cliff old Cimarron collapsed in his saddle. Lane's arm leaped out to him.

The old man straightened up, apparently recovering from the shock of the bullet.

"Ash Burr!" he gasped, "Reckon Ash got wise-trailed me., On

yore way, son. Git to the HM-" Another rifle shot blasted the stillness of the gorge. Somehow Lane

got the horses into a dead run, a hand steadying the reeling form by his side. Gunfire blazed from the opposite cliffs, and above the reverberating reports Lane heard the high, shrill vells of the hidden marksmen

A TURN IN THE TRAIL carried them beyond gunshot. Lane drew the horses to a standstill.

"Keep goin'," gasped Cimarron. "Keep goin', doggone you!"
"You're hurt," Lane said. "We can't keep going, the way you are."

"You're hurt," Lane said. "We can't keep going, the way you are."
With an effort the wounded man straightened up. The failing moonlight showed a face drawn with pain. His left arm hung oddly limp.

"We'll both of us be more'n burt if we don't keep movin', feller." There was a rasp in the old man's gasping voice. "Them wolves'll cross the crick up thar at the Lone Tree ford. They'll be on our tails like bats outer hell." Cimarron kicked his horse into motion down the trail, now narrow and steep.

Lane hesitated, ears reaching for sounds of pursuit. The ford Cimarron had mentioned was at least half a mile back from where the ambush had taken place. It meant that their assailants must ride a good mile before picking up the trail. Cimarron was wiser than he. Their lives depended upon their taking advantage of that mile.

The high claybank leaped forward to the touch of spurs.

Cimarron's horse was making good time, pushing down the precipitous slope at a fast shuffling walk. The old man grinned back as Lane forged up behind.

"Figgered it out, did you?" came his approving cackle. "Figgered

that mile lead we got, huh?"

"If you can stand the gaff, oldtimer," countered Lane. His tone was anxious. Cimarron was drawing on his last ounce of reserve strength, he realized.

"Shore I kin stand the gaff," retorted the wounded man. "Ain't the fust time I caught me a hunk o' hot lead."

He swayed precariously in his saddle, clung with his good hand to pommel.

Lane breathed a sigh of relief when the steep trail levelled out across an expanse of rolling flats. They rode through great clumps of tules and low-growing willows. He spurred alongside his companion and put out a supporting arm.

"How about cutting away from the trail?" he suggested. "Good

place to lose that gang here in the marsh."

Cimarron shook his head. "Quicksands all over this doggone marsh," he said. "That's why we stick to the trail, son."

Lane patted the buffalo gun in saddle-boot. "We can find some place where there's a chance to stand 'em off."

"Reckon you'd make a doggone good try, son, if it came to a show-down." There was a curious pride in the veteran range man's voice,

and affection in the look he swung up at his tall companion. "I gotta better idee," he went on. "Another short mile brings us to Callahan's Crossing, an' it's right thar we'll shake off them doggone, yellow-livered covotes.

"Callahan's Crossing!" echoed the younger man. He recalled the talk with Sam Hally and his partner that evening in San Carlos. It came to him with a shock that only two evenings had passed since that brief talk with the HM men in front of the Cattlemen's Hotel. He felt he had lived a lifetime. Cimarron was looking up at him curiously.

"You heerd 'bout Callahan's Crossing?" he wanted to know, a bit

wonderingly.

"Heard Sam and Seth talking about the place," admitted Lane. "Seth said it was no place to ford on a dark night."

"That's what I'm banking on, son," cackled the old man. "See that

thar moon vonder?" he asked. Lane was silent for a moment. The moon that through the grim night had lent her kindly light now rode low above the jagged ridge of the San Dimas mountains. Clouds were piling in black masses.

"By the time we hit the Big Anita thar won't be no moon," Cimar-

ron needlessly pointed out.

"No mistake about that," agreed Lane dryly.

A low chuckle came from Cimarron Smith's pain-twisted lips, "She'll be plumb dark with them clouds shuttin' out the stars."

Lane glanced down at him uneasily. He needed no further explanation to understand what was in the veteran's mind.

"I'm afraid you're out of your head, old-timer," he commented. "Looks like that bullet has touched your brain if you think we can ford Callahan's Crossing on a pitch black night."

"Crazy as a fox." cackled Cimarron. "You hit the idee plumb

center, son,"

"Seth McGee said it was no place to ford on a dark night. Like walking a tight-rope, with quicksands on both sides.

"Shore," agreed the older man. "Quicksands that'll pull horse an'

man down in no time a-tall."

Sounds reached them from the hills behind-the sharp rataplan of pistoning hoofs. Cimarron Smith flung up a shrewd glance at his fellow-rider.

"Hear them broncs poundin' gravel, mister? That's why I figger me and you fords the Crossin' pronto, an' it's doggone luck she'll be plumb dark, I'm explodin' to tell you."

"You're bleeding like a stuck pig," worried Lane, suddenly aware that the shirt-sleeve of the arm under his companion's shoulder was stickily wet.

"I kin last this play out," rasped the old man crossly. "Shake up

yore bronc, son. No call to be holdin' me to saddle. I'm as tough as any ol' longhorn you'll ever lay eyes on." He surged into the lead, slight, wiry form humped over saddle-horn. Lane pushed after him, was forced to lift the big claybank into a gallop.

Gradually the beat of drumming hoofs drew up from behind, and gradually the roar of falling waters came to Lane's ears. He forged

alongside the man who had been his grandfather's trusted rider.

"Them thar is the Big Anita rapids whar they pinch through the gorge a mile up above the Crossin'," shouted the old man. "Take a thousand-foot drop from thar under the Devil's Bridge."

The broad flood of the river lay suddenly before them, dark and sullen as the moon slid down behind the mountain ridge. Cimarron

pulled to a standstill between two huge black cottonwood-trees.

"Spreads herself wide an' shaller," he commented, and indicated the two big trees. "Them black cottonwoods mark whar you start across from this side. Lay a course o' good hard gravel bank straight for that thar high peak that's just hid the moon. Looks nice an' peaceful," he added. "Sorta like a pretty lake, but she's one ornery death-trap." There was relish in his tone. "Keep to that thar gravel bar an' you kin make the other side without wetthir stirrup-leather. Git a mite careless an' you'll be fightin' quicksand with the odds a thousand to one agin you."

Lane voiced a thought in his mind.

"What's to prevent Ash Burr and his gang from following us?" he

wanted to know bluntly. "They'll push right after us."

Cimarron derided the possibility. "Hell's bells!" he yipped. "Them yellow-bellies ain't got the guts. They'll gun a hombre in the back, but they won't never try Callahan's Crossin' on a black night like this, young feller."

The pursuit was drawing close. Lane's quick glance caught the vague shapes of horsemen pressing through the murk of the night. He swung from saddle, jerked the long Sharps rifle from saddle-boot. Cimarron made no comment, but there was a quick, approving gleam in his tired eves.

Lane sighted cooly, and above the blasting roar of the heavy gun sounded the high scream of a man. The drumming of hoofs suddenly hushed.

Lane swung up to his saddle.

"All right, old-timer." He voice was grim. "Let's ride!"

Cimarron led the way, the high claybank close behind; and suddenly they were in the shallows of Callahan's Crossing. The old man's voice came back to Lane.

"Watch yoreself, son. Keep yore brone's nose p'inted plumb center at my back."

at my back."

"Old-timer"—the younger man's voice was mirthful, but very earnest—"I'm walking the straight and narrow path you set me."

A low chuckle came from Cimarron's throat.

They moved on, steadily and surely, the water leaping in fine spray. But Lane could feel the hard gravel under the claybank's hoofs.

A rifle roared from the shore behind them. Lane heard a vicious whine, the plunk of a bullet that went ricochetting across the water.

"The skunks!" grumbled Cimarron's voice. "They ain't got a chance to hit us. Jest figger to git us narvous an' send us into the doggone quicksands." He continued to fret in his picturesque language. "Thar'll be a day come," he promised darkly, "when I'll pin that Burr hombre's ears back an' spit in his doggone dirty face."

"How much farther, old-timer?" queried Lane presently. "Seems

more like a lake than a river."

"She's the shallers an' spreads a mile across," Cimarron informed

him. "I'd say thar's 'bout a quarter mile to go."

Lane's ears were tense for a second shot. None came, nor could he hear the sound of pursuit across the treacherous shallows. Cimarron Smith had sized up Ash Burr with uncanny sureness. Naturally the man was a coward, Lane reflected. Only cowards shot other men in the back. Cimarron broke in on his reflections.

"We done made it, son! We done made Callahan's Crossin' on a

night as black as hell!"

The horses were splashing with quickening pace up a low, sloping gravel bank. There was a stifled groan from Cimarron, and he slid limply from his saddle.

Lane hit the ground almost at the same moment and stooped anxiously over the prone form. Cimarron was entirely out, unconscious.

"Bleeding to death all this time," muttered the young man frantically. He swore softly, only it was not swearing. It was homage to a gallant man.

He stopped the bleeding finally, tearing strips from his own and Cimarron's shirt. It was a clumsy but effectual bandage.

The old man's eyes opened for a brief space. "Turn left, son. You'll hit trail to—to HM. . . ." He relapsed into unconsciousness.

Only the faintly beating heart assured Lane that his friend still lived. Somehow he managed to climb up to the claybank's saddle, the old man in his arms, and, holding him in his arms, he took the turn to the left, as directed.

There was not much weight to Cimarron Smith's slight, slim frame. Lane could have carried a heavier man in front of him across the saddle. He knew he would never carry a braver man.

The trail reached out in front of him. He kept the high claybank moving at a fast running walk. Cimarron's horse followed closely. He

needed no rope to pull him along. Stars broke through the clouds that had been so providential during the perilous crossing of the Big Anita. They winked brightly from a clearing sky, made friendly cheer.

The miles slipped past. The trail twisted up between low desert hills. The winking stars paled, took flight before the sudden onrush of a desert days.

The canyon dropped down to a long, narrow valley. There was a creek, fringed with green trees, and grazing cattle, and something else that drew a relieved grunt from Lane. That huddle of buildings was

creek, tringed with green trees, and grazing cattle, and something else that drew a relieved grunt from Lane. That huddle of buildings was surely Sam and Seth's HM home ranch.

Pale smoke lifted above the roof of the old adobe ranch-house. Horses stamped in a corral, pricked up inquisitive ears as he rode past to the house. At his shout a man appeared in the doorway, a frying-pan in his hand. Lane recognized the stocky Seth McGee.

The frying-pan dropped from the little cowman's hand. He ran quickly to meet the approaching rider. A second man appeared in the doorway, tall, gaunt Sam Hally. The spurs in his hand dropped with a soft jingle and he followed his partner with long strides. Both men reached the claybank at the same time, but it was Sam who bore the unconscious OK man into the little ranch-house.

Lane literally tumbled from the saddle, and, leaving the two horses to the care of a swarthy Mexican youth who hurried over from the

corral, he wearily followed the HM men.
"Gosh, Sam!" he heard Seth McGee exclaim. "It's ol' Cimarron
Smith."

Sam's calm gaze lifted to Lane, framed in the doorway.

"And the young feller from points East," he added, in his deep voice. He smiled. "Buenos dias, young feller. You're just in time for hreak fast."

10

ROSE PULLED THE MARE to a standstill in front of the hotel. She found the lobby empty. Not even the sad-faced Frank was behind the desk. Voices drew her to the dining-room. She peered through the door, saw Luke Weller.

He sat at a table, facing the door, and his vast, gross body overflowed the chair. His big moon-face lifted.

"Well, well, it's Miss Randall!" he wheezed. "You must join me," he declared genially. "A cup of coffee."

She felt herself drawn to the table against her will. Luke Weller darted a glance at the Mexican waitress, and the latter went scurrying

kitchenward on flapping sandalled feet, wide skirts billowing like the

outstretched wings of a frightened hen.

"You are in town to take the stage, Miss Randall?" The hotel man's tone was doubtful. The girl's faded jeans and boots and flannel shirt were not exactly the clothes a girl would wear for traveling, "Pop Slocum ain't due to start for a good half-hour," he went on. "Plenty of time for a bite of breakfast. You look kind of tuckered, Miss Randall. Long ride in from your ranch."

Rose found her tongue. "Really, Mr. Weller," she stammered, "I

haven't time. I'm looking for Dr. Simpson-"

"Doc Simpson?" Luke Weller stared at her. "What's wrong, Miss Randall?"
"He's needed at the ranch." Rose had herself in hand again. "One

of the men has been badly hurt," she explained. "There was nobody we could spare, so I came."

we could spare, so I came."

The Mexican woman was flapping up with a tray on which was an

extra cup and saucer. Luke Weller looked at her.

"Run upstairs and tell the doc he's wanted at once," he ordered.

"Tell him Miss Randall is waiting. Make haste, slow one!" he added
in Spanish.

The woman gave him a frightened look, set the tray down with a

clatter, and fled into the lobby. Weller motioned to the chair.
"Sit down, Miss Randall. You look done up. A cup of coffee is just

the thing."

She obeyed mutely. The man had a strange power to compel obedience. Not once had his wheezy voice lifted out of its quiet monotone,

yet the Mexican woman had jumped as if he had lashed her with a rawhide whip whenever he spoke or looked at her.

He resumed his own chair. "Tell me about this—this accident."
"It—it wasn't an accident," Rose said. The aroma of hot coffee
came pleasantly to her as he filled her cup from the pot by the side
of his plate.

"No?" Luke Weller gave her a sly glance. "I was thinkin' that maybe the young tenderfoot feller you hired got throwed from a horse or something."

"He's no good," the girl told him. "I—I'm sorry I ever saw him." "You don't mean it!" exclaimed the hotel man. There was a glint in his small. reddish eves. He was obviously astonished.

"I do mean it," declared Rose fiercely. "It was a trick to plant an OK man on the ranch to spy on us. That Lane Mory was nothing but a smooth scoundrel, Mr. Weller."

He made no attempt to conceal his amazement. "I wouldn't have guessed it," he said, in his wheezy voice, "Why in time would he have

pitched into Ash Burr the other evening if he was an OK man?" Luke's tone was puzzled.

"It was a frame-up," insisted the girl. "It was a trick to win my confidence."

"Don't seem possible," muttered Luke.

The Mexican woman reappeared. "The doctor will be down," she informed him in Spanish. Luke nodded, clapped his hands, two loud smacks, and suddenly a man was by his chair. Rose recognized the hotel man's bodyguard.

"Manuel, get word to Murphy to hitch the doc's team pronto," in-

structed Luke. "Got a call to the Lazy R."

"65," murmured the Mexican. He swept the girl with a careless look from murky brown eyes as he turned away. He moved with the sinuous grace and silence of a great cat. Rose repressed an impulse to shiver as the main passed close to her chair. She had the same instinctive horror of him that she had for Luke Weller. She could not quite understand her feelings towards Luke Weller. He was always polite, disposed to be friendly. But she knew that her grandfather had nevel liked the man, had even warned her against him. And there were times when the man's strange eyes had a frightening, devouring look.

She took a sip of the coffee. Luke Weller gave her an approving nod. "So the young feller turned out bad?" he said, returning to the

trouble at the ranch.

"Tim Hook and the boys got suspicious when they found he had Cap Keith's old Sharps rifle," explained Rose. "You know that old buffalo gun, don't you, Mr. Weller?"

"Seen it a heap of times," declared the hotel man. Again the brief flicker in his eyes. He nodded his great bald head thoughtfully. "So I was right," he muttered, half to himself.

"What?" Rose gave him a surprised glance over her cup.

"I mean I'd figgered he was a bad hombre from the first," explained Luke, with a bland smile.

"He fooled me," confessed the girl. "I was taken with him. He seemed so brave—clever. He whippepd Ash Burr for insulting me, and when Ash and his men chased us on the way to the ranch he outwitted them—took their horses and set them on foot." She shrugged slim, dusty shoulders. "It was just a clever trick to win my confidence. He was hired by the OK to spy on me."

"What happened?" asked Luke. He was watching her closely. "Have the boys got him in a safe place?"

"He's escaped," Rose told him. "The boys locked him in the grain room, and an OK man was prowling around and helped him break out. Tule Akers tried to stop them, and they almost killed him. Lane Mory," she added, "stole Tim Hook's best horse. The boys will hang him for a horsethief if they catch him." "How do you know the other man was an OK feller?" queried the

hotel man, obviously puzzled again.

"Tule recognized him," Rose answered. "Old Cimarron Smith. You know old Cimarron."

There was a glazed look in Luke Weller's eyes. He stared at her blankly, and she wondered if he had not been listening.

"So you see there is proof enough that this Lane Mory person is one of that awful OK outfit," she finished.

Luke Weller came out of his trance. He shook his head slowly, "I ain't agreein' with you, Miss Randall. I'll tell you why. It ain't the

OK that's ridin' you and your Lazy R." "The OK is stealing my cattle!" flared the girl. "The OK is bush-

whacking Lazy R men. I think the OK is also back of my grandfather's murder!" Luke lifted a hand. "You figger it wrong." His voice was annoyed. "It ain't the OK that's to blame for all your troubles-these killin's.

You must remember your ranch is close to the border. Your troubles come from down there. It ain't fair for you to accuse the OK-" Ouick steps in the lobby checked him, and he got up from his chair.

Rose looked over her shoulder. The newcomer was a plumpish little man in the middle sixties.

Dr. Simpson was obviously in an ill temper.

"No heart at all," he complained. "Get to bed at two in the morning, and here you come rousing me out of my sleep. What's the idea, Rose? Always thought you were a nice girl." She made a face at him. She knew Dr. Simpson's bark was worse

than his bite.

"Tule got knocked on the head," she told him.
"That old longhorn!" he scoffed. "Couldn't kill him with an axe." He plumped himself into a chair. "I'll not move a step without my coffee," he declared.

"Tule's badly hurt," Rose said. "I wouldn't come for you without

a good reason, Doctor."

Dr. Simpson threw her a fond smile from his table. It was a smile that lighted the tired face with its wisp of white goatee, a gentle, quickly understanding smile that showed the inner man.

"Bless you, child," he chuckled. "Dont' you mind my growls." "You're the best and nicest doctor in the world," declared Rose.

"I'm an expert when it comes to probin' for bullets in these hellraisin' cowboys," he said dryly. He emptied the cup Luke Weller filled from the pot, "Well, Rose, see you at the ranch." He snatched up his bag and trotted out.

"I'll overtake you," Rose called after him.

A slim Mexican youth had come in with a tray and was placing ham and eggs in front of her. She felt it would be unpardonable to flout Luke Weller's kindly hospitality. She had planned to ride back to the ranch with the doctor. The bay mare was done up by the fast run to town. She said as much to Luke Weller.

"I've half a dozen good horses in Castillo's barn," he told her. "You can take your pick. Send for the mare any time it's convenient for

you."

The ham and eggs were good. Rose found that she was hungry, found her taut nerves relaxing as she ate.

Abruptly Luke's voice broke into her reflections.

"I've been doin' some thinking about you, Miss Randall. That big ranch ain't no place for a young girl like you. It ain't right for you to be fightin' them border cow-thieves and killers—"

Rose put down her knife and fork. "There'd be no trouble if the OK would leave me alone," she reiterated. "What happened last night is proof that it is the OK and not any border gang that is stealing my cattle and killing Lazv R men."

"Meanin' this Mory feller and Cimarron Smith?"

"What else could I mean?" The girl's tone was impatient. "Why would Lane Mory have old Cap Keith's Sharps rifle? And why would an OK man help him escape?"

Luke ignored her question. "One minute," he said. "I was sayin' that the ranch is no place for you, and here's what's come to my mind. I'll buy the Lazy R from you—give you a fair price and take the place

and the worries off your shoulders."

Rose stared at him with widened eyes. The man was in earnest, she saw. For a moment she was terribly tempted. It would mean relief from what was becoming a hideous nightmare.... Money ... a chance to get away to a far land where she could in time come to forget the hortors of the Lazy R-forget—Lane Mory. The thought of Lane Mory made her wince. Lane Mory was the cruellest thing that had happened to her. Oddly enough she heard her voice emerging from a chaos of clamoring thoughts.

"I couldn't think of selling the Lazy R," said the cool, crisp voice.

"Nothing could induce me."

Weller seemed surprised. "It's your chance to get out with something," he pointed out. "Won't be long before there'll be no Lazy R for you to sell. way things are shaping with you."

"I couldn't think of it," repeated Rose firmly. She rose from the chair. "My grandfather did some fighting to make that ranch, and I'll do some fighting to keep it—or go down—fighting."

Luke got to his feet. "That's brave talk, Miss Randall"-there was

a covert sneer in the wheezy voice that startled the girl-"but brave

talk won't be doin' much for you, I reckon."

"I—I don't understand you," faltered Rose. "I—I— Well, thank you for everything." She swung on her heels, came face to face with a stout, too elaborately dressed man who smiled urbanely at them from the doorway. Rose suddenly recalled seeing him before. He had arrived on the same stage that had brought Lane Mory to San Carlos. She heard Luke Weller's high, drawling voice.

"'Lo, Falk. Meet Miss Randall."

The stout man in the doorway smirked, held out a white, pudgy

"Ah, Miss Randall! An unexpected pleasure, so early in the day, Miss Randall." Judson C. Falk beamed. "I understand you are the owner of the Lazy R, Miss Randall. A pleasure to meet you." he repeated.

Rose pretended not to see the proffered hand. She was quite sure that the pleasure was not mutual. The smooth Mr. Falk failed to entuse her. Instinctively she distrusted him. She did not like the set of his cold eyes, his large, pink, freshly shaven face, his glib self-assurace. Nor did she approve of his clothes. It was screamingly obvious that the gentleman was a genuine tenderfoot of the first water, from the crown of his large white Stetson hat to the toes of his new shiny boots. Mr. Falk's idea of cowboy attire was extreme, to say the least. Rose stared at him with frank amazement, and a hint of distaste in her lovely eyes.

"Mr. Falk is the president of the new OK Land and Cattle Com-

pany," Luke Weller said.

Rose gave him a shocked look, her slender form grew suddenly rigid.

"You mean the old Keith ranch?" she asked quietly.

"Exactly," beamed Mr. Falk. "I represent the creditors, Miss Randall. A company has been organized to salvage the property, and I have been placed in charge. I hope we shall be good neighbors."

"That's a big hope," Rose said coldly.

"Miss Randall sort of figgers the OK ain't good neighbors to her Lazy R," broke in Luke Weller. "She claims the OK is rustlin' her cows and bushwhackin' her riders. She don't feel friendly to your OK outfit. Falk."

The portly president of the OK Land and Cattle Company was

properly shocked.

"Absurd!" he spluttered. "Unbelievable! I must look into the matter. In the meantime I trust you will give us the benefit of the doubt, Miss Randall."

She looked at him, troubled and perplexed. It was entirely possible that the man was sincere—knew nothing of the OK's depredations.

Or did he? Was he the unknown sinister power responsible for the evil deeds of the OK riders? Luke Weller was speaking again, his drawling voice tinged with ironic amusement.

"Miss Randall has got her mind dead set agin the OK, Falk. I been tellin' her she's plumb wrong, that the fellers that's rustlin' Lazy R cows come from below the border." The hotel man's sides quivered with his silent, mirthless laugh. "She won't listen to me."

"The proof all points to the OK," averred Rose. "I'll not say that Mr. Falk knows what is going on at that ranch, but he can soon find

out, if he cares to."

"I have had the highest reports of the OK outfit and of the foreman, Ash Burr," declared Mr. Falk.

"Another thing," Rose went on. "I don't understand about these creditors. Captain Keith was a rich man. He did not make debts. I've heard my grandfather speak of Cap Keith's horror of debt more than once. Grandfather was a close friend of his."

"Ah, my dear young lady, you must remember that Captain Keith has been dead for more than a year," purred Mr. Falk. "The old ranch has been going to the dogs."

Luke Weller nodded agreement. "A ranch goes downhill fast when

there ain't a boss on the job," he said.

"I thought Mr. Falk said that Ash Burr was so efficient," reminded the girl sweetly. "Mr. Falk has had such high reports of the OK outfit."

There was a hint of sourness in the look Mr. Falk gave her.

Rose went on. "There have been rumors of a grandson-"

"Mere rumors," interrupted the portly lawyer crossly. "There was a grandson, Captain Keith's daughter's child. The boy died in his infancy."

"I don't believe it," Rose said flatly. "Grandfather told me that he had heard Owen Keith speak of a grandson." She threw Luke Weller a brief nod and moved towards the door. "I promised Dr. Simpson I'd overtake him. I must hurry."

"Think that offer of mine over," Luke Weller wheezed. He followed

her into the lobby. "Best way out for you, Miss Randall."

"You have had my answer," she returned coldly. "Good-bye, Mr. Weller—and thank you for the breakfast."

11

ROSE KNEW THE SHORT CUT across the wash of Wild Horse Creek would save several miles and bring her out through the Soledad Canyon on the south side of Dry Lake, where she hoped to intercept Doc

Simpson. She would ride the rest of the way with him in the buckboard and let the mare trail them.

Rita moved along briskly. She was fast, and easy. Rose let her

have her head.

Massive boulders gave way to dense willow brakes, and suddenly Rose saw the man she had been unsuccessfully striving to put out of her thoughts. She gave a startled gash, oulled the mare to a halt.

Lane stared at her from the back of a tall gray horse. He was pale, unsmiling.

The color drained from the girl's cheeks. She was incapable of speech at that moment. She could only gaze at him.

He was the first to break the silence.

"I'm glad—this happened." His voice was not quite steady. "I've been wanting to see you—terribly."

Her chin went up disdainfully, and the mare suddenly jumped under the bite of spurs. Lane's hand reached out, seized Rita's bridle.

"Let loose of her!" She flung the words at him furiously, lifted her quirt.

"I've got to talk to you," he insisted stubbornly. "I want to explain about last night."

"You can never explain!" She attempted to force the mare past him. Lane hung on to the reins, and the excited animal reared. He pulled her down, swung his own horse alongside. For some reason his nearness made the zirl tremble.

"Let me go!" She was breathing quickly. "I-I hate you!"

"Let's talk this thing over calmly," he said.

"I'll not listen to you. I wont—I won't—"

"You must believe me when I tell you it was all a ghastly mistake.

I couldn't stay there—let those old lunatics hang me—"
"You nearly killed poor Tule Akers, you and your OK friend!"

"You nearly killed poor Tule Akers, you and your OK friend!"
"Tule was doing his best to kill us—"

Tule was doing his best to kill us—

"It's no use trying to explain!" Rose attempted unsuccessfully to keep her voice steady. "You can't explain Captain Keith's gun—the fact that an OK man helped you escape."

"If you'll give me a chance I'll tell you what I would not tell them."

"I won't listen!"

Her quirt swung up, lashed viciously at his fingers.

"What's the use of listening to more of your lies? Let go of my horse!"

His hand fell from the bridle. The bay mare surged past. Rose caught a last glimpse of his face, pale, dismayed. The willows closed in behind her.

She kept the mare traveling as fast as the rough going permitted.

The unexpected encounter had left her shaken, heartsick. She would always remember that look in his eyes—the stark misery. . . .

The willow brakes came to an end. More huge boulders in tumbled heaps, and, soon, the rugged approach to Soledad Canyon. The mare slowed to a walk, picked her way carefully. Winter rains had practically obliterated the trail.

Rose began to reproach herself.

She had not been fair. Lane had a right to be heard. She should have listened to him, given him a chance to explain. That look of abject misery in his eyes—the memory of it tortured her. It was cruel to condemn him unheard.

Rose pulled the mare to a halt. She must think this thing out. She drooped in her saddle, unseeing eyes fixed on the boulder-strewn slope ahead.

The mare's ears twitched fretfully, she stamped a foot, tossed her head. Rose suddenly straightened up, swung the surprised Rita around, and went riding back the way she had come. Again the willow brakes closed in on them, and presently Rose saw the little clearing where she had encountered Lane. She remembered the place. There was a lone cottonwood, growing between two big granite boulders.

Lane was no longer in the clearing.

Rose halted the mare, gazed around with dismayed eyes. She felt oddy flattened, and yet she had been rather silly, expecting to find him still waiting in the clearing. Naturally he had gone on his way.

She reflected for a moment, wondering just why she had expected to find Lane where she had left him. Suddenly it came to her. It had been his manner, his blank look of surprise when she had ridden up. Lane had been waiting for some person whom he had arranged to meet in the clearing. Obviously the expected person had arrived, and they had ridden away together.

Rose became acutely conscious of a gnawing disappointment as she sat there on the fretting mare. She was too honest to close her mind to the significance of her emotions. She longed desperately to see Lane Mory—longed to tell him that, no matter what had happened, she believed in him—always would believe in him, even when she did not understand.

She felt oddly comforted, for some reason. The hopelessness fell away, like mist dissolving under warming sunshine. She turned the mare, went on her way almost buoyantly.

SAM HALLEY LOOKED CURIOUSLY at his young companion as they rode down the wash of Wild Horse Creek. The old cowman cannily sensed that something had occurred to disturb Lane since he had left him to wait in the clearing while he made a scout of conditions in San Carlos.

A double reason had brought Sam and Lane to town. Cimarron Smith was a very sick man. He needed a doctor to pull him through. Not only for his own sake was it important to pull him through. There were other reasons. Cimarron knew things about the OK, had hinted that he possessed information that would expose the identity of the man who was bringing dishonor on the old ranch and threatening the destruction of the neighboring Lazy R. Cimarron Smith's life must be saved, at least long enough for him to tell what he knew.

"Tough luck we missed the doc," gloomed the HM man. "Gone out

to the Lazy R, Ed Frake said."

"Tule Akers," Lane told him. "I'm afraid Cimarron smacked him

too hard with that gun of his."

"Only one thing to do," decided Sam. "I'll get Murphy to send word to the doc at the Lazy R that he's wanted pronto over at the HM. No need to say who's sick," he added. "Won't do for folks to know Cimarron Smith is holed up at the HM."

Lane nodded. He was oddly glum, silent, preoccupied with thought

that hurt.

"Acts kind of dazed," reflected Sam. "Queer look he's got in his eyes. Reckon the boy's plumb worn out."

"Ain't so certain about this idee of yores," he said aloud. "Some

risky, showin' yore face in this cowtown right now."

"I want to have a talk with that Falk man," Lane declared. His long frame straightened up. "You remember how the fellow talked that day in the stage, claiming he was the president of the new OK Land and Cattle Company?"

"Shore was gabby," agreed Sam. His tone was thoughtful. "Mighty quere—what he said about *creditors*. Never knowed old Cap Keith to owe a dollar. If he needed cash he sold cows. Never was a man to borrow." He frowned. "How do you figger to make the feller talk?" he asked.

Lane's smile was mirthless. "Might buy him a few drinks," he replied briefly.

"Took a good look when I rode through," Sam went on. "Didn't see no sign of any OK men in town, nor nobody from the Lazy R.

Reckon Tim Hook ain't swore out a warrant for you yet for horse stealin'."

There was no answer from Lane. There was bleak misery in his seyes, and new harsh lines quite wiped the boyishness from his face. Sam was both worried and puzzled. When, four hours earlier that morning, Lane had ridden up to the HM ranch-house with the unconscious Cimarron Smith he had been remarkably cheerful, considering the night's dangerous adventure. In fact, his spirits had soared when Sam and Seth unquestioningly accepted us six siy sirits had soared when some of Owen Keith and the rightful owner of the OK ranch. They had willingly accepted custody of Owen Keith's will and his letter and put them in a safe place, and declared themselves eager to help. Cimaron Smith's serious condition had rather hurried things. Lane was determined that his friend must have medical aid, was resolved to ride immediately to San Carlos for a doctor.

"Ain't safe for you to show yoreself in that town," Sam had pointed out. "No tellin' but what you'll find a warrant swore out for you for

horse stealin', or you might run into Ash Burr an' his outfit."

Lane was insistent, so Sam had reluctantly agreed to the trip, stipulating that Lane must wait in the dry wash while he first had a look to

see how things were in town.

"No sense runnin' into the sheriff's arms," was Sam's sage decision,
"an' no sense mixin' with Ash Burr till we're more set. We gotta
handle this thing easy—take our time. Ain't no doubt but what you're

up agin a gang o' wolves."

They rode out of the willow brakes and across the wide waste of sand towards the slope. Sam's conversation turned to Rose Randall.

"Somethin' mighty queer about the killin' of her granpop," he said. "Coroner's jury figgered it was border bandits. Been some trouble now an' agin with them thievin' coyotes." Sam shook his head. "Ain't so certain the jury figgered right. Thar's plenty been happenin' while Seth an' me was away on our trip, an' it all p'ints to the OK, like Rose thinks."

"She is sure of it," Lane muttered. He gave the old man a sideways glance. "Happen to see her when you rode through town?"

"Nope." Sam glanced up at him shrewdly. "What's on yore mind,

son? Why did you ask if I seen the gal?"
"It's funny you didn't," Lane told him. "I saw her. She wasn't

much more than ten minutes ahead of you."

"You seen her—Rose—this mornin'?" Sam's face was a study.

"She hadn't been gone five minutes when you rode into the clearing

from town."

"Ed Frake never said a word about her bein' in town," grumbled Sam, in an annoved voice. "Would like to have had a talk with her."

"I had a talk with her—or tried to." Lane spoke drearily. "She wouldn't listen—give me a chance."

"So that's what's eatin' the boy," reflected the old cowman. "Looks

like Rose bawled him out plenty."

"She thinks I tricked her," Lane went on, in a hard, tight voice. "It seems Tule Akers recognized Cimarron last night. Of course she's made up her mind that I'm mixed up with the OK outfit, that I'm one of Ash Burr's gang of killers."

"Ain't unnatural for her to figger it that way," agreed Sam. "I can

see her p'int, son."

"The Sharps rifle didn't help things," mourned the young man. "Tim—and the boys—recognized that old gun the moment they saw it. Rose hadn't noticed it," he added. "It was too dark that night when we had the trouble with Ash Burr. I was carrying it then, but she wouldn't have seen it closelv enough in the dark."

"Don't get to worryin' too much," advised Sam gently. "I'll fix it for you when I see the gal. She'll be mighty sorry when she larns the truth."

"It hurts," Lane said, in a stifled voice. "It hurts-for Rose to turn

on me so quick."

"I'll fix it for you," repeated the old man. He added grimly, "We got worse things to worry about. Buck up, young feller. You'll be needin' all you've got for this fight."

"Thanks, Sam." Lane's nonchalant grin was back, the lines smoothed

"Thanks, Sam." Lane's nonchalant grin was back, the lines smoothed from his face, and his shoulders straightened out of their sag. "Somebody will know there's been a fight when the smoke has cleared awav!"

"That's the talk," chuckled the old cowman. "I reckon," he added contentedly, "I reckon folks is goin' to know that ol' Cap Keith's grandson has come to town."

13

DUST DRIFTING LAZILY in their wake, they rode up the street to the Cattleman's Hotel.

"Reckon we'll tie up here," Sam decided. He jerked a nod at the white-proned barma lounging in the doorway of the saloon opposite. The man waved a greeting, stared curiously at Lane, surprised recognition dawning in his eyes. "Monte ain't forgot that lickin' you give Burr." the HM man muttered.

They climbed down and fastened their horses to the gnawed hitchrail that ran the length of the hotel porch. Sam glanced over at the store where Ed Frake was helping two young Box BB punchers load the new camp stove into Clem Sanders' buckboard. "Ed's wonderin' what brings me back to town," chuckled the cowman. "Ed's a good feller, but some nosy." He turned to the door.

Clem Sanders and his pleasant-faced wife came out of the store with their arms full of parcels.

"Sam Hally's just gone into the hotel," Frake told Clem. "You said you was wantin' to see him."

"Shore do," Clem said. He deposited his parcels and went with his choppy walk across the street. He'd been wanting to see Sam about a bunch of yearling feeders he wanted to sell.

"You go ahead and finish yore shopping," he called back to his wife.

Sam was talking to the bitter-faced man behind the desk.

"Seen Falk around this mornin', Frank?" he queried.

"What-all was you wantin' to see him for?" The man expectorated copiously and squinted a surprised look at Lane. "Hello, mister!" He grinned sourly. "You shore run out on us the other night."

"I was asking you a question," rumbled Sam.

The desk man hesitated, stared reflectively at the stairs, scratched an ear with a pencil.

"Falk? You mean that lawyer feller?"

The cowman gave him an exasperated look.

"I ain't got time to waste, Frank." There was a growly note in Sam's voice.

The man grinned. "Ain't my business to keep tabs on Falk nor nobody else," he said. "Don't know where you'll find Falk. Might try that new office he's opened across the street. Wonder you didn't spot his sign. It's big enough."

Sam turned on his heel. "Hello, Clem," he greeted the Box B man in the doorway. The latter threw Lane a grin of friendly recognition. "Some luck, Sam," he smiled. "Was wantin' to see you about them

vearlin's."

Sam's face wore an unwonted sober look. He gave Clem a brief nod, continued to stare up the street at a trailing banner of dust. Horsemen, and riding fast. The sight of that approaching dust perturbed the old cowman.

Clem Sanders sensed his uneasiness. He studied the long dun plume low against the blue sky.

"The OK outfit," he surmised. "Those fellers 'most always come in by way of Red Butte Pass."

"That's what I figgered," muttered Sam Hally. He gave Lane a grim look. "How many of yore boys in town, Clem?" he asked the Box B owner.

The latter gestured. "Chuck Belden and Tom Jenks, over yonder. Why, Sam?" Clem forgot the business that had brought him across the street. His shrewd guess was that his old friend was worried. Some-

thing to do with those approaching riders, who might be OK men. Clem's glance flickered at Lane. Something to do with the tall young stranger. "I'll go tell the boys to stick around close," he added, not waiting for Sam's answer.

They watched him cross the street with his quick, choppy walk.

Sam's smile was grim.

"Clem was always a fast thinker," he observed. "A good hombre, an' I ain't sorry a-tall him bein' in town right now, him an' those two boys of his."

"I'm guessing you expect trouble." Lane's smile was cool. "I'm not asking you to stay. Sam."

"I've taken cards in this game, son." The old man's voice was mildly reproving. "I aim to play 'em."

Three men rode up the street from Murphy's barn. Clem hailed them, and they pulled up by the side of the buckboard.

"Smoke Wells an' two of his Cross Knife fellers," Sam muttered.
"Smoke is foreman of the Cross Knife," he added. "We can count on him to the limit." Relief was in his voice.

Nell Sanders reappeared from the store with the little boy. Clem spoke to her. Nell sent a startled look across the street at Sam and his companion and hurriedly climbed into the buckboard. Clem lifted his son to the seat, and his wife went rattling away. Clem watched for

a moment, then crossed back to his friends standing on the hotel porch.

"Sent Nell on home," he told Sam. His glance went to the five cowboys huddled in conference. "Smoke figgers he'll stick around for a
spell," he added, with a grin.

"No call for you boys to get mixed up in this business," Sam Hally said gently.

"If thar's trouble on the prod, we aim to mix in plenty," retorted the stocky young cowman. He stared hard at Lane. "Ain't knowin' who this hombre is, but if he's yore friend he's my friend too."

Sam introduced them. The two younger men shook hands.

"Mebbe won't be no trouble," Sam hoped. "No tellin'. Ash Burr is on the prod for Lane, and thar's other things in the wind. Tell you about it some other time, Clem."

The young Box B owner nodded briefly, threw Lane a reassuring grin, and hastened back to his friends across the street. Sam's gaze went to the spurting streamers of dust, now less than a mile distant.

"Well, son," he said mildly, "how about 'tendin' to the business we come for? If my eyes ain't foolin' me, that's our friends shingle yonder."

The sign, newly painted, hung over the door of a small frame building crowded between the saloon and the town marshal's office.

JUDSON C. FALK Attorney-at-Law OFFICE OF THE OK LAND & CATTLE COMPANY

Lane nodded. "The suggestion is exactly what was in my mind," he said solemnly. "No doubt Mr. Falk will be delighted to see his late fellow-passengers." He grinned. "I think, Sam, that I'll ask him for a job with the OK. Makes a good excuse."

"Shore," agreed Sam. "The idee is to start him to talkin'."

Luke Weller's voice greeted them from the lobby door behind. They stared around at him, met his affable smile.

"Hello, Sam! How's things at the ranch?"

"Ain't complainin' none," the HM man assured him. "How's tricks

with voreself, Luke?"

"Fine, fine!" declared the hotel man. He beamed, moved towards them. He was surprisingly light on his feet. "Well, young man. Back in town, eh?" He nodded pleasantly to Lane. Left us in a hurry the other night: never used the room you paid us rent for."

"Had a chance for a job," explained Lane. "Didn't pan out, worse

luck."

"Too bad," sympathized Weller. His gaze rested for a brief moment on the Sharps rifle sheathed on the gray's saddle. "Too bad," he repeated. "I'll see what can be done for you." The hotel man's eyes narrowed in a sharp look at the gray horse. "Or has Sam taken you on?

I see you're riding an HM horse."

Sam shook his head. "Yore guess is wrong, Luke. Ain't hirin' new hands till next round-up." Sam was thinking fast for some explanation about the gray horse. "Met Lane on the stage when he come to town the other day. Lane said he was in the market for a good bronc, and I told him I could fix him up, so he come over last evenin' and picked out the gray." The old HM man rambled on shamelessly. "That har gray is one good bronc and just what he needs, but Lane figgers to try him out some afore he'll close the deal." Sam chuckled amusedly. Smart young feller when it comes to dickerin' for a bronc, for all he claims to be a tenderfoot."

"Needn't be afraid of any horse Sam offers to sell you, young man," gravely reassured Luke Weller, smiling at Lane. "I know that gray,

Mr. Mory. An excellent animal."

Lane nodded agreement. There was something about Luke Weller's smile that struck him as peculiar. The smile did not extend to the eyes. They stared at him with unwinking intentness. Cold, reptile eyes eyes that gave him a creepy feeling.

Sam went on with his rambling lies. "Told him he could ride the

brone to town. He was sayin' he figgered to come to town about a job. So I come in with him, to take the brone back to the ranch if we don't make the deal."

The dun pall of dust was drawing close. The drumming of hoofs came to them. Clem Sanders was strolling down the street with his two punchers. Smoke Wells was swinging from his saddle in front of the store, and his two Cross Knife men came jogging over to the hotel. They threw brief nods at Sam and Luke as they dismounted.

Sam spoke again. "How about it, young feller?" he asked Lane

genially. "Is it a deal for the bronc?"

"I like the horse first-rate," Lane admitted. His glance went to the new sign across the street. "If I can land a job with some outfit it's a deal." He smiled at the hotel man. "I met a man named Falk coming in on the stage the other day. He told me he was the manager of the OK ranch. I think I'll go over to his office and strike him for a job."

Luke Weller approved of the idea. He knew the new manager, he

told Lane.

"I'll put in a good word for you," he promised. There was a bland, speculative smile on his moonface, a smile that did not reach his eyes, and again his gaze rested on the Sharps rifle in Lane's saddleboot. "So you didn't make a go of it at the Lazy R," he went on. "What was the trouble. Mr. Morv?"

"Well"-Lane grinned-"you see, that outfit is a bunch of old-

timers-

Luke Weller nodded. "I savvy," he smiled. "Old-timers is right. I reckon Tim Hook was some peeved when he saw the tenderfoot the boss took home with her."

"Peeved is no word for it," laughed Lane.

"We all have to make a beginning," observed the hotel man. He lowered himself into his big porch chair. "I'll put in a word for you with Falk," he repeated.

"I'll mosey over to the office with you," Sam Hally offered.

The hotel man lifted a protesting hand. "Let me talk to Falk first. A word from me will cinch things. Falk"ll be glad to do me a favor." He eyed the two Cross Knife punchers lolling against their horses in the shade thrown by the hotel porch. "What's keeping you, boys?" he queried. "Thought you were in a hurry to get back to the ranch."

"Waitin' for Smoke Wells," explained one of the men, fingers busy with cigarette paper and tobacco. "Smoke stopped in at Frake's for the mail." He grinned. "Reckon Smoke got a letter from his girl and

is writin' back to her by return."

"Smoke is shore one love-sick hombre," drawled his companion. He shook his head sorrowfully. "Cain't talk about nothing but that feemale."

Lane eved them interestedly. There was something reassuring in their calm, rather hard young faces, their quiet voices. Capable. resourceful men, he reflected. The sort of men who made good friends. The thought sent a pleasant tingle through him. He would not be without friends when Ash Burr rode into the street.

The outfit roared past in a swirl of dust and drew rein in front of the marshal's office. As the tall OK foreman swung his black horse around to the hitchrail his fiery glance travelled across the street to the group on the hotel porch. An oath exploded from his lips.

"There he is!" he yelled. "There's the skunk! Come on, fellers, we don't need the law for this job."

The street was suddenly a bediam, and in a moment the yelling, cursing outfit was charging down on the hotel. The foreman jerked his black horse to a plunging halt.

"You there!" he snarled. "Stick 'em up, feller!" His gun menaced

"Are you talking to me?" Lane's voice was cool, almost insolent. "You bet I'm talking to you!" shouted Burr. "I've a mind to fill

you with lead, the way you did Pete Dorn."

"Ash"-it was Sam Hally's deep voice-"I'm advisin' you to take it easy."

Something in the old cowman's tone seeped beneath the volcanic fury that was convulsing Ash Burr. He sensed a warning, grim, not to be disregarded. He stared at Sam morosely. There was no gun in his hand, nor had Lane made any attempt to draw the Colt that was in his holster. He threw a sideways glance at the two Cross Knife men lolling with apparent indifference against their horses, met their half insolent grins.

"What you mean?" he demanded sullenly.

"I mean that Lane Mory has friends in this town," answered the HM man mildly. "I'm one of 'em, and thar's others kind of close, if you'll take a look."

"Squint!" The OK foreman's voice was tight. As Lane had suspected, there was a vellow streak in the arrogant Ash Burr. "Squint,

take a look back of us."

One of the scowling riders turned and stared for a tense moment. Lane and Sam exchanged faint smiles that brought a smothered oath from the OK cattle boss. A louder oath rapped from the thin-lipped Squint Roan, his lean, death's-head face swung around.

"Smoke Wells is back of us, boss," he said softly, "and Clem San-

ders, with two of his boys, fixed to smoke their guns at us."

Ash Burr lowered his .45 slowly, and slowly he turned his head and looked across the street. Smoke Wells, the Cross Knife foreman, stood framed in the doorway of Frake's store, a rifle at his shoulder. Behind

Smoke stood Ed Frake, also with levelled rifle, and crouched in the narrow alley between store and saloon was Clem Sanders, a gun in each hand. The OK foreman's startled survey of the street failed to detect Church Bedlen and Tom Jenks, but if his gaze had lifted to the flat roof of the marshal's office he would have seen the grinning faces of the two young Box B punchers—seen the glint of sunlight on rifle barrels.

Muttered imprecations came from the group of riders at Burr's back as they realized they were trapped. The OK foreman darted a malignant look at Sam Hally and his tall companion, and slowly holstered his gun.

"I'm sendin' for the sheriff," he said sourly.

Lane's Colt was suddenly in his hands.

"Not so fast, Burr." His tone was chill. "I don't trust you much—not as much as I'd trust a rattlesnake. A rattlesnake sounds a warning,

and you don't, so I'm not trusting you, Burr."

There was a tense stillness, broken only by the restive stamp of hoofs, the creak of leather as the hard-faced riders shifted uneasily in their saddles. Sam Hally was eyeing Lane with some amazement, and the careless grins had left the faces of the two lounging Cross Knife men. The OK foreman rolled his eyes at Luke Weller, motionless in his big chair. The hotel man was staring at him contemptuously.

"You can talk to the sheriff all you want to," Lane went on coolly, "but first I'm taking your guns. I have no intention of taking a shot in the back," he added, with a mirthless laugh. He nodded at the two

Cross Knife punchers. "All right, boys. Take their guns."

An oath snarled from the lips of one of the horsemen. His gun

flashed up, went spinning from numbed fingers at Lane's .45 roared.

He stood in a half crouch in front of them, smoking gun menacing, his eyes blazing. The man whose gun he had shot from his hand was swearing softly and staring with shocked eyes at his bleeding fingers.

"All right, boys." Lane spoke quietly. "I think they'll be good."

The Cross Knife men went at the business with sober faces, but none the less briskly. It was plain from their expressions that they were deeply impressed. Conficating the weapons of an outfit as notoriously hard-boiled as the OK was something in the nature of an epic, a story that would live long in the annals of the Spanish Sinks.

Obedient to the menace of Lane's gun, the scowling, astonished men kept their hands above their heads. Lane looked at the weapons piled on the floor of the porch. Twenty-six guns and ten ritles. Ash Burr's riders were well supplied with munitions. Hired gunmen, professional killers, these hard-eyed men on the pay-roll of the OK, he reflected bitterly.

Clem Sanders and Smoke Wells approached from across the street, came to a standstill behind the discomfited outfit.

"Climb down," Lane curtly told the disarmed riders.

The foreman swore at him, stepped down from his saddle, and in a minute the ten men were huddled in a group.

"You'll pay plenty for this show," Burr said fiercely. He glared around at the fast-growing crowd of curious onlookers. "You ain't big enough in this country to make monkeys of us."

Something stirred in the open window behind Lane. He whirled, gun levelled. "You!" he rasped. "Come out of there—and keep your hands up."

"Si, senor." The Mexican crawled through the window and backed

up against the wall, a venomous look in his murky brown eyes.

"Now, young man," protested Weller, in his wheezy voice, "don't young et on the prod with Manuel. He's only doing what I pay him for, keeping his eyes on things for me."

Lane stared at the man doubtfully, frowned at the long-bladed knife clenched in the Mexican's brown hand. He had a dark suspicion that Manuel had intended no good with that wicked-looking knife that he held.

"I'm not taking chances with him, Weller," he retorted coldly. "I've an idea he was about to do some fancy knife-throwing—with me for a target."
"You're unduly apprehensive, young man." Weller's tone was an-

"You're unduly apprehensive, young man." Weller's tone was annoyed.
"I have reasons to be apprehensive," Lane said grimly. He gestured

with his gun. "Drop that knife, hombre."

The blade clattered to the floor.

"Sam, take the fellow's gun."

"Shore," chuckled the somewhat dazed old cowman. He deftly removed Manuel's long Colt from its holster, and at another curt command from Lane the Mexican slouched into the street and joined the group of angry OK men.

"I want you where I can see you," Lane said. His gray eyes, hard

and cold, bored at Ash Burr.

"What was the idea, mister, pulling your gun on me?"

"You know why," sneered the OK foreman. His glance swept the wondering crowd. "Listen, folks! This jasper killed Pete Dorn last night, shot Pete off his horse—bushwhacked him—"

"That's a lie," Lane retorted.

"Lie nothin'," declared Burr loudly. "You was seen makin' yore getaway. Ain't that right, boys?" He appealed to his men. There was a confirming chorus, and a voice came from the crowd demanding more proof.

"Proof!" shouted Burr. "We got plenty of proof." He pointed at the Sharps rifle in Lane's saddleboot. "Pete was shot with a bullet from that old buffalo gun."

"Where was this killin'?" asked the same voice.

"Up there above Callahan's Crossing," Burr answered. His gaze challenged the pressing onlookers. "You all knowed Pete Dorn, folks. I reckon you're doin' somethin' about it when a stranger comes and pulls off a cold-blooded killin'."

A low growl came from the crowd. Lane glanced at Sam Hally, saw the old man was visibly uneasy. Burr pressed the advantage he sensed he was gaining.

"How about it, folks? Are we goin' to let this jasper get away with

murder-come hellin' around in this town like he owns it?"

"Not when there's plenty ropes handy!" shouted an angry voice. The speaker was a paunchy, red-faced man with an apron tied around his middle. A bartender from the saloon. He pressed through the surging crowd, shook a fist at Lane. "We ain't likin' yore kind in this town," he proclaimed. "Ain't that so, Luke?" He looked at the hotel man motionless in his chair.

Weller lifted a hand for silence. The angry mutterings subsided.

The hotel man's calm gaze swept the glowering faces in the street. He was like a great fat god, sitting there in his big chair, the bald dome of his head pink and shining.

"No sense losin our heads," he said, in his high, nasal voice. "Ash claims there's been a killin, and says this young feller here done the killin." Weller shook his head doubtfully. "It's my idee that Ash ain't given us proof enough."

"Meaning to say I'm a liar?" fumed the tall OK foreman.

"Keep your mouth closed till I get done talking," Luke Weller told him acidly. There was a glint in his reddish eyes as he stared at Burr. His gaze swung to Lane. "Were you around Callahan's Crossing last night?" he asked.

"Yes," admitted Lane briefly.

"What were you doin' at Callahan's Crossing?"

"That's my own business," the young man retorted curtly.

"He won't talk!" shouted the aproned bartender. "I reckon that proves he done the killin'."

"Shut up, Fargo!" snapped Weller. "Better get back to your bar," he added.

The man seemed to cringe under the look Weller turned on him. He slunk away, was lost in the closely pressing throng of onlookers. Lane was vaguely conscious of a cold horror as he stared at the fat hotel-keeper. The man had a strange power. There was something satanic about him. Misgivings seized Lane. Weller would not befriend him he realized.

"Did you kill Pete Dorn?" Weller's voice had lost its bland tone.

He flung the question sharply.

"I'm not answering questions," Lane replied. "I don't know Pete Dorn—never saw him, to my knowledge."

The crowd was suddenly restless. It was plain that Lane's attitude was not helping him. The growing uproar seemed to worry the hotel

man.
"Where's Shedrow?" he wanted to know. "Why ain't Shedrow around when he's needed?"

"He ain't in town," shouted a voice. "The marshal went out on the

stage this mornin' to Pinto."

"That's bad," muttered Weller. He wagged his great hairless head.
"You acted too high and mighty, holdin' up the OK outfit, taking their
guns from 'em. Got the whole town worked up and wanting a showdown about this killin'—"

"Only thing Lane could do," broke in Sam Hally. "He's got plenty

reason to mistrust Burr and his gang."

"I don't know anything against Burr and the OK," Weller said thinly.

"Mebbe it's time you did," retorted the old cowman. His keen blue eyes swept the sea of angry faces. The situation was fast becoming perilous. Sam knew the signs. The mob fever was fomenting in that seething, sullen crowd. Death was in the air.

14

"We gotta get out of here," Sam muttered to Lane. "Hell's due to bust loose.

The crowd was breaking up into little groups. There was no doubting the dangerous mood of these men. Ash Burr was popular in the town, freehanded with his money, a boon companion. Lane was a stranger; he had slain a man they all knew.

Clem and Smoke pushed up to the porch where the two Cross Knife punchers stood by their horses. Ash Burr gave them a malignant look.

"Won't forget yore play," he told them. "You'll pay plenty, holdin' yore guns on us like you done."

They ignored him. Clem said something to the Cross Knife men, and suddenly they were all of them up on the porch and crowding around Lane. Their guns menaced the crowd.

There fell a stillness in the street, the ominous quiet that precedes a storm's devastating violence. All eyes were fixed intently upon that little group of men by Lane's side. They were men will known in San Carlos. Old Sam Hally of the HM, renowned for his courage, featles Clem Sanders of the Box B, lightning fast with his guns, Smoke Wells of the Cross Knife, a stern and determined man, and the four younger punchers, salty as they came, brothers of the range, all of them fighting men whom odds could not daunt. Not to be stampeded, these seven grim-eyed men Lane found standing by. His heart warmed.

A voice lifted from the crowd.

"We want that killer!"

"Turn Ash Burr loose, him and the boys!" yelled another voice. "We won't stand for yore play!"

The OK men, huddled in a group with their foreman, grinned uncertainly, cast longing looks at their confiscated guns heaped near Lane's feet. Luke Weller, who had not moved from his big chair, spoke placatingly.

"Seems like this thing's gone far enough," he said. "Turn Ash loose,

him and his fellers. There'll be trouble if you don't."

"Not till Lane is out of this town," declared Sam Hally grimly. "We got the edge on 'em right now. We're keepin' it till Lane is away from here." He glanced over his shoulder at the lobby door. "Get movin'," he told Lane. "Get out the back door and head for that arroyo. I'll meet you down thar with the brone."

Lane shook his head, reluctant to leave his friends holding the bag. "I'll go," he muttered, "but I'm riding down this street. I'll not make

a sneak by the back door."

"Don't act foolish," grumbled the old cowman. "We ain't doubtin' yore nerve, son. Start down that street and you'll start guns smokin'."

Luke Weller lifted his mountainous frame from the chair. He had no love for danger so perilously close. He preferred to pull the strings in security.

"You won't take my advice," he complained. "I ain't staying here to catch stray lead." He turned towards the door. "If Shedrow was here I'd say clap the young man in jail for his own sake—keep him in a safe place till the thing's threshed out, or till we can turn him over to the sheriff."

"You stay right whar you are," Sam said curtly.

Weller gave him a startled look, and there was a hint of paleness under the pink of his face.

"You've got inflooence with these folks," Sam pointed out. "You talk to 'em, Luke; quiet 'em down and give Lane and me a chance to go peaceable."

Weller hesitated, swung his head, and looked for a moment at the scowling OK men. He gestured at them.

"Turn 'em loose," he temporized. "Give 'em their guns back, and I'll see what I can do."

Sam glanced at Clem Sanders. The latter shook his head, and

there was a dissatisfied grunt from Smoke Wells.

"You talk to them damn' fools first, Luke," he said harshly. "We ain't lavin' our cards down till this thing is settled right."

The hotel man's little red eves glinted angrily. Nevertheless he

slowly turned and confronted the dense throng in the street.

"To bad the marshal ain't here," he grumbled. "Jail is the best place for your troublesome friend-" He broke off, stared intently at a lone horseman jogging slowly up the street. There was a sudden rumble from the crowd.

"The sheriff!" cried a voice. "Here's the sheriff!"

Luke Weller contrived to conceal his disappointment, He gave Lane a bland smile.

"Lucky for you, young man," was all he said.

The newcomer reined his brown horse and gloomily eved the faces turned expectantly towards him. He was small and wiry, with a lined. sunburned face and a drooping reddish-gray moustache. There was a weary sag to his dusty shoulders, and it was plain that the sheriff was in from a long, arduous desert pilgrimage.

"What's goin' on here?" His frowning gaze travelled over the crowd to the group on the hotel porch, and something like a smile lighted his deep-set eyes. "Hello, Sam, old-timer! What's the celebration? A fiesta? Or is it a shootin' match for turkeys?" The sheriff's face hardened. "Or am I interruptin' a little necktie party, ridin' in like this without an invite?"

"Waal, Sheriff"-the old HM man chuckled-"I reckon it was some careless forgettin' to send you a invite. I was tellin' the folks that mebbe you'd feel kind of hurt if we went ahead and had a party without vou givin' a permit."

The sheriff's frosty gaze swept the sullen faces.

"I ain't givin' no permit," he said curtly.

"There's been a killin'," grumbled a red-faced, burly man from the edge of the crowd. "Been too many killin's in this county, Sheriff," he went on truculently. "We figger it's about time Judge Lynch holds court in this town."

The little sheriff eyed the speaker coldly. "You're talking to the law. mister, and the law don't like yore brand of talk. Button yore lip, or you'll see the inside of a jail."

Sam Hally knew Sheriff Brent for an honest and fearless officer, They had long been staunch friends. He holstered his long Colt and eyed down at the glowering Ash Burr.

"Waal, now's yore chance to tell yore story to the sheriff, Ash," he

said mildly. He gave Lane a quizzical smile. "No harm lettin' the boys have their guns now the sheriff's on the job."

"Suits me," Lane replied tersely. He holstered his own gun. There was the scrape of leather as his friends followed suit.

Sheriff Brent climbed stiffly from his saddle.

"Take my bronc over to Murphy's, one of you fellers," he grumbled wearily. "I'm bettin' I'm the hardest worked law-officer in the state of New Mexico. Wore out three broncs in six days chasin' a pack of ornery border rustlers." He pushed on through the throng, dragging spurs rasping tiny trails in the dust. The OK men were hastly retrieving their guns from the porth. The sheriff's eyes widened a bit.

"How come?" he grinned. "Been holdin' an auction, Ash, you and

yore outfit? No buyers, huh?"

"Auction hell!" snarled the angry foreman, busy searching for his silver-mounted Colt among the pile of guns. He threw a furious glance at Lane. "I want that jasper thrown in jail for killin' Pete Dorn—a cold-blooded murder!"

The old sheriff sighed, climbed up to the wide porch, and eased himself into a chair. "I'm takin' a long, cold drink," he declared. "Luke"—

he smiled at the hotel man-"how about it?"

Weller clapped his hands. "Bring the sheriff a cold bottle of sarsaparilla," he told the Mexican youth who glided up. The hotel man knew that Sheriff Brent never touched liquor. He resumed his own chair and smiled blandly at the officer.

"Good thing you happened along, Jim," he said. "Folks is all worked up about this Pete Dorn killin'." He glanced significantly at young

Mory. "The trouble ain't done with yet," he added.

"No?" Sheriff Brent eyed Lane curiously. He knew Sam Hally, and he kne?" Sheriff Brent eyed Lane curiously. He knew Sam Hally, and paparent that they were on the side of the young stranger whom Ash Burr accused of murdering Pete Dorn. It was a point in the accused man's favor. Sam and his fellow-ranchers were not apt to take sides with a cold-blooded killer. The sheriff frowned, stared thoughtfully at the crowd in the street. Weller was right. Violence smouldered out there. It was a dangerous crowd, and there were faces there the sheriff recognized. San Carlos had changed of late, the old law-officer reflected. The once decent little cowtown was fast becoming a rendezvous for all the riff-raff and scum of the border. Sheriff Brent sighed again. No, the trouble was not done. There were dangerous undercurrents flowing through those restless groups of men. He recognized the signs—the low, conspiring voices, the furtive looks in his direction.

Sam Hally moved towards the horses at the hitch-rail. "Waal, seems like it's best for Lane and me to be on our way." He looked hopefully

at the sheriff. The latter shook his head.

"Don't be in a rush, Sam." His tone was regretful. "Ash Burr has accused your young friend of murder."

"We seen the killin'," declared the OK foreman. His voice was purposely loud, rose above the low mutterings of the crowd.

His hard-faced riders backed him up vociferously.

"The skunk shot Pete in the back!" shouted Squint Roan. His long lip lifted, exposed teeth in a death's-head grin, "It's jail for that longlegged hombre, Sheriff-or a rope! We ain't lettin' him ride away from here."

Old Sam looked at his companions with troubled eyes. Getting out of San Carlos was not going to be an easy matter.

The Mexican youth glided up with the bottle of cold sarsaparilla on a tray. He filled a glass and handed it to the sheriff. The officer drank thirstily, smacking his lips, and put the glass down. He was doing some fast thinking.

"What's your idee about this business, Luke?" he asked the hotel man.

"Bad business," answered Weller, shaking his head, "It ain't for me to tell the sheriff what to do, but I know what I'd do in your place."

Sheriff Brent's grizzled brows lifted questioningly. "I'd slap the young man in jail-for his own good. We don't want a

lynchin' in San Carlos, and the signs point that way unless you take proper steps." The veteran officer nodded gloomily. Lane's breath quickened as he

saw decision hardening the lined, weathered face. The thought of jail shocked him. He threw Sam Hally an appealing look, The HM man's face was grave.

"Give us a chance to get away, Iim," he begged the sheriff, "We can get out the back way-hide out in the arroyo till the boys can bring our broncs."

Sheriff Brent stared worriedly at the shifting, restless men in the street. Burr and his riders were circulating from group to group, and the low mutterings loudened to rumbling growls.

"No chance for you to get away," Luke Weller doubted. "There'll be a hundred men after you, Sam." He shook his head. "They wouldn't stop with swinging young Mory. You'd dangle alongside of him."

The thought appalled Lane. Jail was preferable to risking the mob's insensate fury against staunch old Sam. He gave the sheriff a cool smile.

"All right, Sheriff. Let's see this jail of yours."

"I don't like the idee," grumbled Sam,

Clem Sanders and Smoke Wells made no comment. They were watching the milling crowd with bleak, inscrutable eyes. Lane guessed they were secretly relieved. They did not know what Sam knew-that he was Owen Keith's grandson. It would have made no difference. These men would have stood by him if it came to a fight, but it was plain they approved his willingness to take temporary sanctuary in the San Carlos prison. The alternative promised dead men in the street.

Sheriff Brent finished his sarsaparilla and got to his feet,

"I'm obliged to you, young feller," he drawled, "Saves a heap o' trouble."

"You ain't arresting him," Sam pointed out, "Lane just figgers to save trouble, like you say."

The sheriff nodded. "I'm not arresting him," he agreed.

The OK men were doing their work well. The crowd was suddenly a mob that surged like a tidal wave down on the hotel porch. Luke Weller left his chair with astonishing swiftness and vanished through the door.

"We want that killer!" yelled a hoarse voice-the same burly man who had argued with the sheriff earlier.

The veteran officer's hand lifted.

"Lemme talk," he begged

They grew silent. His stern gaze swept the sea of angry faces. "I'm taking this man to jail," he told them, "I'm warning you not to interfere with the law."

"He killed Pete Dorn!" shouted the burly man. "No sense wastin' time. I say swing the hombre pronto!"

The sheriff stared down at him, his eyes like blue ice.

"I'm warning you, Wellin: another peep outer you and I'm lockin' you up." Brent's tone was ominously thin, "I've been hearin' tales about you, Wellin. Shouldn't be surprised but what you'll stay locked up a mighty long time."

The man's face paled, and, muttering an oath, he slunk away.

Sheriff Brent smiled at the silent, upturned press of faces.

"Take it easy, folks," he urged. "You go about your own business and leave things to me."

Oddly enough it was Ash Burr who suddenly came to the sheriff's support. Perhaps it was the covert signal from Luke Weller, watching from the lobby door, that influenced the OK foreman. He strode up to the porch steps and lifted a hand.

"The sheriff's right," he shouted. "Leave this hombre to the law, fellers. All we want is justice, and I reckon we all know Sheriff Brent."

An approving vell answered him, and in a moment the street was filled with the sound of booted feet as the crowd broke up.

"Thanks, Ash," said the sheriff gratefully. He gave Lane a bleak smile. "All right, young man."

Sam Hally and Clem Sanders accompanied them across the street to the squat adobe jail behind the town marshal's office. Smoke Wells grinningly asserted that he was in the need of liquid refreshment, and pushed through the red swing-doors of the Horsehead Saloon, where Monte and Fargo, the two barmen, were busily attending to the demands of a sudden rush of clamoring and thirsty patrons. Chuck Belden and his two Cross Knife friends followed at Smoke' heels. They knew without being told that Smoke Wells had a purpose in mind. Smoke was not a drinking man, and his pretense of a raging thirst did not fool the younger punchers in the least.

"Keep yore ears open, boys," he muttered, as they lined up at the

long bar. "Circulate round. Listen to the talk."

Čhuck Belden nodded, glanced carelessly at a table against the far wall. Squint Roan, the OK's premier gunman, occupied one of the chairs. His companion was the burly Wellin, and the pair were obviously having a conference. Chuck took up his glass and indicated an adjoining table.

"Might as well set," he observed to Tom Jenks.

The two cowboys pushed through the throng to the empty table. Squint Roan, sitting with his back to their table, did not notice them. His companion gave them a brief glance and went on with his low-voiced conversation. He did not know the two Box B men.

Sam Hally had observed Smoke Wells disappear through the swingdoors. He quite understood the Cross Knife foreman's maneuver. Smoke planned to mingle with the crowd, pick up information that might prove valuable. Sam was pleased. He managed to get in a few words with Lane while the sheriff conversed with the jailer, a heavy, swarthy man named Dan Stokes.

"Don't fret too much, son," Sam told Lane, "We ain't desertin'

you."

"I'm not very keen about this jail business," Lane confessed, with a wry smile. He frowned worriedly. "I can't stay in jail, Sam. I've got work to do, and I'm anxious about old Cimarron. We haven't had a chance to send word to the doctor at the Lazy R."

Clem Sanders pricked up his ears. "Cimarron!" he exclaimed. "You

mean Cimarron Smith of the OK?"

Sam nodded. "He's over at the HM," he explained. "Haven't had a chance to tell you about things, Clem."

"You've got me guessin'," muttered Clem. He stared hard at Lane. "What's Cimarron doin' out at yore place, Sam—and hurt?"

"Cimarron got shot up bad last night. Lane brought him in."

The Box B man looked thoughtful. He began to understand dimly. There'd been a fight at Callahan's Crossing and Sam's mysterious young friend had killed an OK man—killed Pete Dorn.

The sheriff came up with the dark-browed jailer. The latter gave

"All right, feller."

Lane followed the man down a dark and narrow passage, fined with

a double row of small rooms. Each room had a heavy wooden door in which was set a grille of iron bars, and high in the thick adobe outer wall was a narrow window, also inset with iron bars. There was no sleeping cot, nor even a stool. Only a pile of dirty straw in one corner. A most promitive affair, the San Carlos iail,

The heavy door swung shut, and the jailer turned the key. His

saturnine grin come to Lane through the grille.

"Got the jail all to yoreself," he said. "You're lucky, mister. Ain't so peaceful here when all the cells is full o' drunks."

"I don't think it's much of a jail—as jails go," Lane confided.
The iailer misunderstood. "Don't you be fooled," he sneered. "These 'dobe walls is two foot thick an' stone-hard. No chance for you to break out, mister,"

"I was referring to the comforts," grinned his prisoner. Boot-heels clattered on the hard-packed earth of the narrow corridor, and Sam Hally's stern face replaced the jailer's dark visage at the little iron-barred opening in the door.

"Clem is sendin' one of his boys out to the Lazy R," he informed Lane. "Don't worry about Cimarron. We'll get the doc out to him pronto."

"Get me out of this place quick, Sam."

"Shore will, son." The old cowman's eves beckoned him to come closer. "Listen," he whispered. "I'm tellin' Jim Brent about you. Jim was an old friend of yore grandpop,"

"If you can trust him." Lane agreed doubtfully.

"We've got to trust him, and Jim is all right at that. Leave it to me, son, and keep a stiff upper lip. We'll get you out of this damn' place before night." Sam's reassuring smile reached through the semi-darkness of the cell, and Lane heard the tramp of his boots down the corridor. A door slammed. He was alone. For the second time in twentyfour hours he was a prisoner.

15

JUDSON C. FALK STARED UNHAPPILY at the legal document spread before him. It was a pretty piece of work he had accomplished with his pen-in fact, quite the most skillful forgery of his career. Falk was confident it would pass the most expert scrutiny, once a certain signature had been attached. He was reluctant to apply this last finishing touch to the forged deed. Not from any qualms of conscience. The portly lawyer's conscience was long since shrivelled and dead. His reluctance came from a very natural desire to keep on living, and he had an uneasy premonition that writing in the still lacking signature would be equivalent to signing his own death warrant. It was a disagreeable thought that quite horrified Mr. Falk,

He sat slumped disconsolately in his chair, beads of perspiration on his chubby face. Fear gripped him with clammy hands. He was in a

trap that all the frantic efforts of his mind could not spring.

The heat in the dingy hotel bedroom was stifling. He lurched to his feet, tore off coat and waistcoat, and flung the garments on the disordered bed. He needed a stiff drink. A drink would steady him.... Luke Weller would be in to see him soon. He must have some plausible excuse ready for Luke Weller. . . .

The thought of Weller made him weak in the knees. He feverishly dragged a bag from under the bed, took out a bottle of whisky, and resumed his chair at the little pine table. It wasn't his first drink that day. The bottle was more than half empty, and he had got it only that morning from Monte over at the Horsehead. He filled a glass, drank it down, and filled a second glass. His hands were shaking, he noticed. He couldn't pen that signature now even if he wanted to finish the job. It would not serve as an excuse for Luke Weller, Falk realized. He muttered an oath, drained the second glass, and gazed with horrified eyes at the document on the table. He must think of some reason why he had not written in that signature, some excuse Weller would accept without suspicion.

Falk's despairing gaze travelled around the dingy room. No chance of escape, not with that cat-footed Mexican devil always on the watch downstairs.

Panic seized the lawyer anew. Luke Weller was a fiend. He cursed the day he had consented to do the man's dirty work. He was in Luke Weller's power, and once he had finished the work that had brought him to San Carlos he knew only too surely that Weller would remove him forever from the haunts of men. Weller would take no chances. The man's working motto was that dead men were safe keepers of secrets.

Falk stiffened, stared with bloodshot eyes at the door. Footsteps.... Luke Weller's light tread. It was amazing how swiftly and lightly the huge man could move. There was muscle under the rolls of fat that encased his big body.

Falk's bulging, glassy eyes became suddenly fixed on the bottle of ink on the table. He muttered an exclamation, snatched the bottle, and drained its contents into the spittoon at the side of his chair. The ink ran out green, the same color as the crabbed handwriting of the grant deed on the table. The act seemed to steady his nerves, brought a relieved smile. He replaced the empty bottle by the side of the document and leisurely lightled a cigar. The light, quick footsteps paused at his door, there was a rattle of the knob, then a gentle double knock.

Still smiling, Falk got out of his chair and went to the door and

turned the key. The color was back in his cheeks.

Luke Weller came into the room. Falk closed the door and turned the key.

"Keep the door locked," he explained easily. "Don't want folks bursting in while I'm on this job."

Weller nodded.

"Good idee," he admitted. He sank into a chair by the table and looked eagerly at the document. "Finished it?"

Falk smiled, blew a puff of smoke, and resumed his seat. "All finished but the signature," he confided. "A good piece of work, Mr. Weller, if I do say so."

Weller held out an impatient hand, "Let me take a look."

Falk obediently proffered the big, crinkly sheet of paper. He had the air of one proudly showing a work of art. Weller adjusted a pair of spectacles and scrutinized the green-inked lines with painstaking attention. Something like admiration began to glow in his eyes. His case lifted to the intently watching lawyer.

gaze lifted to the intently watching lawyer.

"Falk," he said solemnly, "if I didn't know that you'd done it, I'd
swear on my oath that old Cap Keith wrote every word." His sides
shook with his sinister, silent laughter. "No wonder the banks figger
they want you behind stone walls. I'd say you're the world's slickest

forger."

"I'll fool the best of 'em," declared Falk, with a complacent smile. He leaned back in his chair, cigar tilted in one corner of his fat-lipped mouth. "It would fool Keith himself if he could see it," he chuckled. "One good thing about it is the ink, Mr. Weller. It's mighty lucky you remembered that old Keith always used that shade of green ink.

"I don't never forget important details," Luke Weller said, in his wheezy voice. "That's why I'm kind of successful, Falk." He looked complacently at the sheet of paper in his hand. "Won't nobody doubt this deed when you get Owen Keith's name on it," he declared.

Falk darted an uneasy glance at the ink bottle. There was a hint of

panic in his small, piggish eyes.

"It's a cinch," he agreed.

Weller fumbled in a pocket of his rumpled linen coat and fished out a

large envelope.

"Here's a blank deed," he said. "You won't need to do any forging on this document." The hotel man's smile was disagreeable. "All you gotta do, Falk, is to describe yourself as owner in fee simple of the OK ranch and write in my name as the purchaser from you and sign your own name to it as the seller."

"Sure," assented the lawyer. He shrugged plump shoulders, critically eyed the end of his cigar. "That will close our deal, Mr. Weller. I resign the president job, and you pay me the five thousand cash, and I catch the stare back to railhead—Chicago."

"I reckon that's the idee, Falk." Luke Weller smiled blandly. "I won't be needin' you." Ruby pin-points flickered in his weasel eyes as

he stared at the other man.

Falk stirred uneasily under the look. "The deed to you is not so simple as you seem to think," he pointed out. He gestured at the forged document. "That paper conveys ownership of the OK ranch, and all heriditaments thereunto appertaining, from Owen Keith to me, as duly appointed representative of the creditors. My deed to you must describe me as the said duly appointed representative of the said creditors of the late Owen Keith, and empowered to sell and convey the said described lands to the best advantage—"

Weller interrupted him. "You're a lawyer," he said, in his wheezy, petulant voice. "It's up to you to word it accordin' to law." He spaced his words significantly. "All I say is, don't you try any of your tricks on me, Falk. I can put you behind the bars if you act foolish." Weller's smill was wicked. "I can do worse than that, mister, so be awful careful—or I'll tip off the law where to find the feller who poisoned that

widder woman back there in Chicago. . . . "

Falk's face was suddenly ashen. "Weller," he stammered, "you you couldn't sell me this damn' desert for a nickel a square mile. All I want is to get back to God's country with that five thousand dollars you promised. I'm a city man. I crave to live close as I can to the asphalt."

"(Well"—the hotel man's voice was contemptuous—"the West is a man's country, Falk. I reckon your kind don't belong here." His silent laughter shook him. "Didn't see you around when the folks went on

the prod for that young tenderfoot feller."

"I sneaked out of the office the back way," explained the lawyer.
"Came up to my room to work on the deed." He repressed a shudder.

"My God, Weller! That was a close call for young Mory."

"The boy has guts," commented the hotel man curtly. "He comes by 'em natural."

Falk's eyes questioned him.

"He's Owen Keith's grandson," explained Weller. His red weasel eyes glowed. "You remember, Falk, I was telling you I kind of suspected him—was watchin' for any young feller that drifted into the Sinks."

The lawyer's eyes bulged at him. "How did you get wise to him?" he wanted to know in a dazed voice. "My God, Weller, I—I don't like this. He is going to make trouble."

"I reckon not," reassured the hotel man placidly. "No call for you to get stampeded, Mr. Falk."

"How did you get wise to him?" repeated the other man. "He had

me fooled-coming in on the stage-"

"It ain't necessary to tell you how I got wise," Weller said, a bit contemptuously. "I'm a smart man, Mr. Falk. Folks don't fool me long." He heaved up from the chair, glanced at the forged deed spread out on the table. "Finish your job, mister. Write in that signature and fill out the deed to me."

The lawyer shifted uneasily in his creaky chair, blinked his eyes nervously at the ink bottle. "I—I can't do that signature right away,

Weller," he confessed. "You see-the ink-"

"What about the ink?" The hotel man gave him a venomous look. "Don't try any tricks, Falk. I won't stand for your tricks."

"I—I mean there's no more ink—the green ink," mumbled the lawyer. Sweat broke out in little beads on his face, and he pointed a shaky hand at the bottle. It's empty—"

Weller glared at him, fury and suspicion in his look. His unwinking eyes turned on the bottle. He picked it up, stared at it intently, then

carefully replaced it on the table.

"I'll need some more of that same ink," Falk told him. "You said

old Keith never used any other kind of ink."

Weller was obviously worried. His look swung back to the portly man in the chair. "It happens there's no more of that same green ink," he said quietly. "You see, Falk, I got that bottle of green ink from Keith's desk at the OK." He wagged his big head gloomily. "There ain't no more of that ink handy."

"Perhaps Ed Frake carries it," pretended to hope the lawyer. He knew already that Ed Frake carried no green ink of any description. "I reckon Ed don't carry it," muttered the hotel man. He stared

"I reckon Ed don't carry it," muttered the hotel man. He stared again at the bottle. "Lucky the label is still on and readable." He took the bottle up again. "Only thing we can do is to send to Chicago to the folks that make it."

Falk swore feelingly. "That means I'm stuck in this cowtown of yours for another couple of weeks," he bemoaned. He frowned. "Maybe we can get by with plain, ordinary, common black ink," he suggested. Luke Weller shook his head. "I told you I don't overlook details,"

Luke Weller shook his head. "I told you I don't overlook details," he reminded curtly. He turned to the door. "I'll send a rider to the Junction with a letter right away. No sense to wait for the mornin' stage."

"Good idea," agreed Falk smoothly, almost too smoothly.

Weller eyed back at him from the doorway. "You can be makin' out that other deed," he reminded. "And, Falk—you stick around close to the hotel. It'll be a lot healthier for you." The hotel man's smile was full of meaning. "I'll sort of spread the news that you're closin' your office and aim to go back East as soon as you've got over your sick spell." The door closed behind him.

Falk drew out a large silk handkerchief and wiped his damp face.

There was the look of a trapped animal in his eyes.

16

THE CUSTOMARY SATURDAY AFTERNOON crowd was dribbling into San Carlos, Lean-flanked cowboys and dusty, whiskered prospectors from the desert hills. Buckboards and ranch-wagons rattled up the street with ranchmen and their women. Indians and Mexicans mingled with burly, bearded miners, and there were certain individuals who looked sullenly askance at Sheriff Jim Brent as that salty old law-officer pushed his way through the throng with Sam Hally.

'We'll mosey back into the arroyo a piece," the old cowman suggested to his companion. "Too many sharp ears in this street, Iim, an'

what's on my mind to tell you is important an' secret."

They found a place in the gully behind the hotel and sat down on a fallen cottonwood stump in the vellowing light of the late afternoon.

"It about young Mory," Sam said bluntly, "He's old Cap Keith's grandson, Jim."

"The hell you say!" The wiry little sheriff goggled at his friend.

"I'm tellin' you," Sam affirmed grimly.

The sheriff pondered for a moment. "I ain't as surprise as I should be," he finally said. "Come to think of it, the boy's got the Keith look about him, and he's shore got the Keith nerve."

He listened without further interruption while Sam related what he

had learned from Lane.

"We gotta help the boy," Sam declared earnestly. "You know as well as I do thar's queer doin's out at the OK these days. Here's this jasper, Judson C. Falk, callin' hisself the president of the new OK Land and Cattle Company an' claimin' he represents old Cap Keith's creditors. Don't make good sense. Owen Keith wasn't one to go into debt." Sam shook his grizzled head. "It stinks, Jim. Thar's only one explanation. Some hombre is framin' to get possession of the old Keith ranch, and I figger that this hombre has spotted young Mory for the missin' grandson. The boy is marked for death, Jim."

"Do you figger Ash Burr is mixed up in the deal?" queried the sheriff. He stared thoughtfully at the shadows beginning to make blue mist at the base of the distant hills. "Ash and his fellers seem awful

set on this charge of his killin' Pete Dorn."

"It was touch an' go afore you come along," Sam informed him.

"Ash done his best to get up a lynchin' party, and from the way he

acts, it shore looks like Ash is mixed up plenty in the deal."

"He's mebbe obeyin' orders," suggested Jim Brent sagely. "I never figgered Ash Burr was any too smart." The sheriff gave his friend a shrewd glance. "I'd say that Falk holds the key to this business. Ash Burr ain't got the brains for this kind of deal. It's too complicated."

"It's plain hell, Jim," declared the HM man. "There's more to it than the OK. There's them killin's at the Lazy R-old Bill Randall's murder. . . ."

"We kind of figgered it was border rustlers," the sheriff said, in a nettled tone. "There's been no evidence that points to the OK bein' mixed up in them killin's."

"Seth an' me was away from the Sinks for quite a spell," Sam reminded his friend, "We didn't know about these killin's till we got back the other day." He shook his head sorrowfully. "Four Lazy R men shot from ambush. Iim. It ain't reasonable to put it down to border killers. Thar's some hombre out to run Rose Randall off her range, and somethin' tells me he's the same hombre that's after Lane Morv's skelp."

"I reckon Cimarron Smith could tell us a lot-if he don't cash in,"

ruminated the sheriff.

Sam Hally jerked to his feet, "Was meanin' to ask Clem Sanders if he sent one of his boys out to the Randall place like he promised. Be too bad if we don't get the doc over to fix Cimarron up."

The two men went stumbling up the rock-strewn slope, nor did they notice the bright, beady eyes watching from behind a clump of greasewood. Presently Pinto rose from behind the concealing bush and shuffled towards the hotel. There was a satisfied look in the old Indian's slits of eyes as he vanished into the dim interior of the kitchen. He was due for the welcome piece of silver Luke Weller always dropped into his grubby paw in exchange for interesting bits of information. Pinto held a roving commission as look-out man. There was little that escaped his sharp, spying eyes.

"Sam"-the sheriff's voice was thoughtful-"I'd like to see those

papers you say young Mory gave you to keep for him."

Sam came to a standstill. "What for?" he wanted to know a bit tartly, "Seth an' me looked 'em over careful, I know Cap Keith's handwritin'. His letter and the will are wrote in green ink, like he always used. He was kind of funny that way-always used green ink he got special."

"It's like this," explained Jim Brent. "It's in my mind to swear young Mory in as a deputy sheriff-give him more authority. But I'd like them papers."

Sam considered a moment, "I'll ride out to the ranch for 'em," he decided.

"Another thing," went on the sheriff. "If Cimaron can do some talkin', you write down what he says and have him sign it. His sworn statement'il be good evidence if he happens to cash in his checks."

The old HM man approved the suggestion.

"I'll fork saddle just as quick as Î've seen Clem Sanders," he assented. He gave the law-officer a worried look. "Kind of hate to be leavin' Lane lyin' in that lousy jail. No tellin' what might happen in this town tonight."

"I'll be here," reassured Jim Brent,

"Let the boy loose from that jail," pleaded Sam. "Nobody need

know, an' I'll keep him safe out at the ranch."

"No can do," grunted Brent. "I got to do my duty as sheriff of this county, and there's a charge of murder against him. Mebbe I can do something about it when you bring me them papers," he added placatingly.

"This town is full of border scum—killers an' no-'count riff-raff. Shore is queer the way these border hellions is swarmin' into San

Carlos these times."

"I've got my eye on some of 'em," Brent told him grimly.

Sam refused to be reassured.

"You couldn't do much if hell busts loose tonight," he grumbled. "Like as not they'll take young Mory from jail an' swing him in spite of you."

He found Clem Sanders talking to Smoke Wells and the latter's two

Cross Knife men. Their sober faces corroborated his fears.

"Smoke's been gettin' a' earful," Clem told the sheriff and Sam worriedly. "Smoke an' the boys have been mixin' around in the Horsehead,

an' things don't look good."

"That Wellin hombre an' Squint Roan are talkin' plenty," Smoke Wells confirmed. "Some jasper is settin' up free drinks for the crowd. There's a lot of ugly talk goin' on." The Cross Knife foreman shook his head pessimistically. "Won't surprise me none if they get worked up to a necktie party before mornin'."

Sam and Sheriff Brent exchanged dismayed looks. The latter made

a swift decision.

"Clem," he said crisply, "I'm swearin' you in as a deputy—and you too, Smoke." He eyed them questioningly. They nodded grim assent. "First thing you do is hightail it out to your ranches and round up all your boys. Get back as quick as you can make it. If there's any hellin' in this town tonight, I reckon it won't come along till towards mornin'. They'll want to likker up good first."

"I'm ridin' now," Clem Sanders said. He turned on his heel. "Gotta

get a bronc from Murphy's. Tom," he added, "you fan it for the Sandhill camp. Tell Jingo Breeze an' Tennessee to come kitin'. I'll round up the rest of the bunch at the ranch."

The lanky Tom Jenks grinned, jerked a nod at the sheriff, and sprinted for his horse. Smoke Wells swung up to his saddle. The two young Cross Knife punchers raced for their horses tied to the hitchrail in front of the hotel. The stern-faced foreman called them back.

"You stick here with the sheriff," he told them. "Put yore broncs in Murphy's barn, an' keep your eves an' ears open till I get back with our bunch."

Sam Hally's gaze went to the tall gray horse standing by the side of his big roan.

"While you're about it, boys, you might take care of Lane's bronc for him. See that he gets a good feed." Sam gave the sheriff a nod and followed the Cross Knife men across the street.

17

THE SUDDEN EXODUS OF RIDERS had not passed unobserved by Luke Weller, watching from behind the curtains of his office window. He went back to his big desk-chair and stared with satanic amusement at the two men Manuel was ushering in through a rear door.

"Anybody see you fellers?" he gueried softly.

"No," answered Ash Burr. "We come in through the kitchen, like you said. Went out the back door of the Horsehead an' sashayed around the coulée back of the hotel." He grinned. "Needn't worry about any hombre seein' us come over to yore dump, Luke. Me and Squint ain't fools."

Weller's bland nod masked his secret opinion of the two OK men. Of the two he held the saturnine Squint Roan in the higher esteem. Squint was chary of words, but he had the cunning of a killer wolf, and as a tracker he had no equal in the Sinks.

"What do you want to see us for?" went on the burly foreman.

"What's in the wind, Luke?" He chuckled good-naturedly. "Things is moving along smooth as silk," he continued, not waiting for an answer. "Sam Hally has beat it out of town, an' so have Smoke Wells and Clem Sanders. Glad to see them hombres make dust away from here. Leaves the town wide open for our play tonight."

"I reckon you wan't so good at figgerin' things when you was at school, Ash," commented Weller. His tone was contemptuous. "Never

could add up two and two, could you?"

The OK foreman eyed him sullenly. "You think you're awful smart, Luke," he grumbled. "What's on yore mind?" Burr scowled. "What's

addin' up two an' two got to do with those hombres leavin' town?" "It means that if you figger it right, like I do, they'll be back in

town with their outfits, and all set to make plenty of trouble if you go for Lane Mory again," Weller explained patiently.

"The hell!" exploded the big foreman. His face reddened, and he looked inquiringly at his hard-eved companion. "What's vore idee, Souint? Think Luke has it figgered right?"

The OK man nodded. "My bet lays the same way," he said briefly. Burr swore angrily. "We cain't buck them outfits," he complained.

"We gotta work fast!"

"You mustn't forget the sheriff," reminded Weller. "Jim Brent is still in town. You'll run into trouble if you try any rough stuff with Brent in town." The hotel man gave his listeners a sour smile. "You know Iim Brent," he warned.

"That old mossy horn!" scoffed Burr. .

"Brent is mebbe a mossy horn, but his horns are still mighty sharp," Weller said grimly.

"Plenty sharp," agreed Squint Roan. His teeth bared in a wolfish

grin. "An' plenty smart," he added.

Weller stared at him attentively. "I've a job for you, Squint," he smiled. "I'll tell you about it in a minute." His voice sharpened. "Manuel!"

The tawny-faced Mexican made his swift, noiseless approach from his curtained alcove.

"Si. senor?"

I want Pinto to beat it over to Old Town with this note for Pedro Castillo," Weller scribbled hurriedly as he talked, a few lines worded in Spanish. He tore the sheet from the pad and thrust it at the Mexican. "Tell Pinto to make haste. Pedro will understand."

"Si. senor."

The Mexican slid away on his cat-like feet. Ash Burr's gaze followed him distastefully.

"Gives me the creeps-that slinky-eyed greaser," he muttered. "Makes me think of a snake, him an' that damn' knife."

"Manuel is useful," reproved Weller acidly. "He don't make mistakes. Ash, like some fellers that work for me do."

The OK foreman gave him a sulky look, but wisely held his tongue. There were times when he found Weller's unwinking stare unpleasantly disturbing.

The hotel man went on in his high, nasal voice. "I want Squint to make tracks for the HM ranch an' 'tend to a little business for me."

"What for you want Squint ridin' vonder to the HM?" Surprise was in Burr's voice. "I want Squint in town."

"Cimarron Smith is out there," Weller told him, He laughed silently.

"Ain't that good enough reason for Squint to be nice and sociable?"

Burr's eyes glistened. "I'll say it's a good enough reason!" he chortled. "How come you know the double-crossin' skunk is out there,

"I have my ways of learnin' things," smiled Weller. He flapped a limp, boneless hand, "Pinto heard the sheriff an' Sam Hally talkin'."

The bony-faced cowbody got out of his chair,

"Want me to start now, boss?" He hitched at sagging gun-belts, grinned wolfishly. Weller nodded.

"Better take one of the boys with you," he suggested.

"I'll git Fred Archer," decided Squint. He turned towards the private rear door.

"You know what to do?" Weller's tone was wicked. "The idee is we don't want Cimarron to do any talkin'."

"I savvy," grinned the slate-eyed killer. "He won't do no talkin'

after I git done with him." "An'. Squint"-Weller's red weasel eves glowed-"if you an' Fred

Archer run into old Hally on the trail, you'll know what to do?" There was sinister understanding in the man's brief nod. The door closed stealthily behind him. Weller's gaze swung back to Burr.

"How are things out in the street?" he asked.

"Goin' good," confided the foreman, "Yore idee of spreadin' it around that Mory is an Association man is workin' slick. Wellin has swallered it hook, line, an' sinker. He's buzzin' 'round busy as a bee." Burr rolled his eyes in wicked amusement, "Shore lucky that Wellin an' that bunch of his is in from the border tonight. An Association detective is poison to them ornery rustlers," "Keep at it." encouraged the hotel man. "Get 'em to drinking

plenty.

"I'll need more dinero," Burr said, "Monte told me to tell you." Weller opened a drawer and took out a fat canvas sack. "Here's five

hundred." He dropped it on the desk. There was the clink of gold.

Burr picked the bag up and crammed it into a pocket.

"I'll mosey back-keep things stirred up," he chuckled, getting out of his chair.

Weller stared at him thoughtfully. "Here's another idee, Ash," he wheezed. "If things move too slow to suit you it would kind of help things if young Mory pulled off a suicide. . . ."

The two men looked at each other, and there was a mutual and evil

understanding in their eyes.

"I get you," muttered the OK foreman. His face was pale. "Youyou're a devil, Luke," he told the fat man, in a strangled voice. "There ain't nothin' you won't do to git yore way."

"Mebbe that's why I'm a successful man, Ash," returned Weller placidly. His gesture indicated that the conference was over. Burr continued to eve him steadily.

"You ain't forgetting what you promised?" he went on slowly. "The

Lazy R would be mine, you agreed."

"I don't forget nothin'," assured the hotel man smoothly.

"An' the gal?" insisted Burr truculently. "I git the gal." His eyes flamed. "I'm gittin' Rose," he reiterated hoarsely.

"She may have something to say about it," Weller pointed out. His

tone was surly, and for the first time he seemed unable to meet the younger man's eyes.

"I ain't worrvin' about what she'll sav," bragged the foreman. "She'll come crawlin' when I get done with her." He glared suspiciously at Weller's lowered face. "I'm warning you now, Luke: don't you do any double-crossin'. Savvy? Rose Randall an' the ranch is my pickin's. Do you get me? Rose is mine, along with the Lazy R!" Burr clattered arrogantly from the room, slammed the door behind him.

Weller sat there for a long minute, staring at the papers on his desk. There was an odd pallor on his big face, a strange drawn look of mingled insensate hate and animal desire that for the moment made a grotesque and hideous mask of those ordinarily serene and lineless features.

Manuel came in from his errand and glided to the door that opened on the lobby. Weller heard the sheriff's voice asking for him. His distorted face smoothed out, resumed its Buddha-like immobility.

The veteran law-officer sank with a sigh into a chair.

"I'm wore out, Luke," he grumbled. "This county shore plays hell with a sheriff. I've a notion to retire and buy me a nice hotel and get fat and prosperous like you." He chuckled. "You shore have one easy time of it, Luke. Nothin' to worry you an' not a blame thing to do but sit in yore easy chair an' rake in the dinero."

The hotel man flapped a limp hand. "Ain't as soft as it looks, Jim," he protested. "Takes brains to be a successful man like me. You'd be

surprised to know the hard work I put in usin' my brains."

"Mebbe so," agreed the little sheriff, stifling a yawn. "Mebbe I ain't got the brains to run a hotel an' be a successful man like you. Ev'ry hombre to his trade. I reckon chasin' ornery cow-thieves is more in my line. I ain't kickin'-much." He laughed, slapped a hard, lean thigh. "It's 'most time yore dinner gong makes some noise, Luke, and I'm fixin' to send a bang-up dinner over to young Mory at the jail."

"The best in the house, Jim," readily assented the proprietor.

"You savvy, he really ain't under arrest," the sheriff pointed out. "I had to make some kind of move to quiet things down."

"You done right," Weller praised. "The feelin' was runnin' high, an'

you know what a mob is, Jim. No sense to a mob."

"Waal, you 'tend to that dinner for the boy—" The sheriff got out of the chair, stood listening intently. "Sounds like there's some excitement out in the street," he added uneasily. "That feller tore into the street like ol' Nick was on his tail."

"Some cow-puncher in a hurry to celebrate," smiled the hotel man. Excited voices floated in from the open window. The sheriff stiffened,

muttered a dismayed exclamation.

"Cow-puncher nothin'!" he rasped. "It's some hombre yellin' for me." He went clattering into the lobby.

Weller turned his head and stared at Manuel. The latter nodded, grinned.

"Pedro Castillo," he muttered softly in Spanish. "It is most amusing, senor—and so easy to make a fool of the Senor Sheriff."

"I am a smart one," returned Weller, in the same language. He was out of the chair and moving towards the lobby. "We will watch thefun, Manuel."

Sheriff Brent was listening with frowning attention to an almost incoherent Mexican on the hotel porch.

"I saw him with my own eyes, Senor Sheriff!" babbled the man. "It was indeed he—El Tor Rubio! He passed within three feet of where I lay behind the bush, and I saw his red hair."

The sheriff's face wore an eager look. El Toro Rubio, an Irish-Mexican outlaw, had long been a thorn in his official flesh. He dearly longed to lay this wily and notorious border rustler by the heels. The redheaded renegade was as slippery as an eel—a ruthless killer.

The old law-officer's keen eyes probed the bringer of this news of El Toro Rubio. It was plain that the Mexican had ridden far and fast—the horse standing in the street was trembling with fatigue, its flanks reddened from the bite of gouging spurs.

"What's yore name?" he asked curtly.

"Pedro Castillo," answered the Mexican. He rolled the whites of his eyes at Weller, watching from the doorway. "If the Senor Sheriff makes haste he can trap this man in the house of Juan Gonzales, where he plans to sleep tonight," Pedro went on breathlessly. "I heard him talk to the man who rode with him as they passed when I hid from them in the brush."

The sheriff nodded. He knew the house of Juan Gonzales down in the left fork of the Big Anita. He long long suspected that Juan Gonzales

was secretly a member of the El Toro Rubio gang.

Weller spoke softly from behind. "You're in luck, Jim. Act quick and you'll have that damn' rustler where you want him—behind the bars—and a noose danglin' for him."

The sheriff turned and glared at him, started to retort heatedly. His

eves suddenly gleamed.

"I want to talk to you, Luke," he said. He threw a nod to the Mexican. "Muchas gracius, hombre," he thanked curtly. "I'll see that you get some of the reward money." He turned into the lobby. "Come on back to your office, Luke. Somethin' I want to tell you."

The hotel men paused a moment to signal Manuel with his eyes. The latter nodded, beckoned Pedro Castillo to follow him around to the

kitchen quarters.

"What's on yore mind, Jim?" queried Weller, when the two reached the latter's office.

The sheriff closed the door and stared intently for a moment at the other man.

"Luke," he said earnestly, "I gotta go get this El Toro feller. It's the first time he's ever given me the chance to hold a gun on him."

Weller nodded, waited for him to continue.

"It puts me in a hole," grumbled the little law-officer. "I promised to stick close to the iail tonight."

"What do you want me to do?" Weller's tone was casual. "I don't look for any more trouble in this town tonight, Jim. Young Mory is safe in jail. He can't break out."

"Sam heard talk of plenty trouble brewin'," the sheriff worried. "Sam is scared of that bunch over at the Horsehead. Lane mebbe can't break

out of jail, but those fellers can break in."

Weller's expression was skeptical. Brent continued in a lowered voice.
"I'm tellin' you a secret, Luke. This Lane Mory is old Cap Keith's
grandson, and we've got reason to think there's somebody here in the
Sinks who wants the boy put out of the way."

The hotel man was properly astonished.

"Owen Keith's grandson!" He stared unbelievingly.

"Ain't got time to explain how I know," Jim Brent went on hurriedly, "Here's my idee. You can help me out of this mess."

"Do all I can," promised Weller gravely.

"I want you to go over to the jail and bring young Mory over to the hotel as soon as it's plumb dark," continued the sheriff. "Smuggle the bay in and keep him hid where nobody will think to look for him. Folks will think he's broke jail if they go to get him and find him gone. Nobody will suspect you've got him hid, and when Sam gets back with the boys, you can put 'em wise."

"I'll do it," agreed the hotel man suddenly. He nodded. "Leave it to me, Jim, and you go nab El Toro Rubio—this phantom red bull of

the border."

"Gracias, Luke." The officer's tone was gateful. He chuckled contentedly. "El Toro Rubio is shore due for one big surprise."

THE STAR WINKED CHEERFULLY at him from the black void, a blazing jewel of the night framed in the narrow rectangles of the small barred window high in the opposite wall.

It was something for Lane to look at, something concrete to which hope could cling. He was not alone while he had the star to look at, nor could hope become quite lost in the darkness of that prison cell.

He sat on his heels, his back pressed to the cold adobe wall. It was preferable to the litter of dirty straw, which he suspected harbored crawling things.

Lane had not eaten since the early morning meal at the HM ranch, but as yet there was no room in his mind for thoughts of food. It was Sam Hally's failure to keep his promise that troubled him. Sam had not come, or sent word.

The hours had passed with torturing slowness. Sunset fires and soft twilight had looked in from the narrow window, and now the lone star, a lighted candle in the dark night, keeping his hope still burning.

The sharp squeak of rusted metal drew Lane from his unhappy meditations. The corridor door—the dim glow of lamplight—approaching footsteps. Sam Hally at last!

He knew almost instantly that he was wrong. That slouching tread was not Sam Hally's.

Lane stared disappointedly at the face of Dan Stokes peering at him through the iron grille in the door. The rays from the lantern held high in the jailer's hand made him blink.

The man leered at him. Lane saw that he had been drinking.

"Kinda lonesome, huh, feller?" Stokes spoke thickly. His grin widened. "Mebbe yuh won't be lonesome long," he added, with a drunken snicker.

"Where's Sam Hally?" asked Lane. He got to his feet and went close to the door, caught the smell of whisky on the jailer's breath. He forced himself to speak lightly. "Sam said he'd be back to see me."

"Ain't seen Sam," hiccuped the jailer. "Heerd he went back home.

. . . I dunno-an' don't give a greaser's damn."

"The sheriff?" Lane held his voice steady. Sam Hally had deserted him. "Tell the sheriff I'd like to see him."

The jailer guffawed, the malicious leer of his unshaven face unmistakeable. "Brent ain't in town, mister. He's gone to catch him a rustler. Yuh cain't see the sheriff tonight." Stokes rolled bloodshot eyes in drunken amusement. "Mebbe yuh won't never see the sheriff ag'in," he added meaningly.

"He'll be back," Lane said, forcing a smile. "He'll bring in his man."

"Wasn't sayin' he wouldn't be back," chortled the jailer. "You must be dumb, feller."

Lane held on to his grin. No sense angering the drunken and decidedly hostile jailer. For the moment he was completely at the man's mercy. It would be easy for Dan Stokes to use the gun he wore in his holster, and easy for him to explain the killing of a prisoner while attempting to break jail.

"What kind of a hotel is this place that doesn't bring supper to a

hungry guest?" he joked. "Your cook on a strike?"

Stokes scowled.

"Brent didn't say for me to bring you supper," he grumbled. He lowered the lantern, then, apparently relenting, he pulled a flask from a pocket and poked it between the iron bars of the grille. "Grab hold of this, young feller. There's plenty more where it comes from." The lailer snickered. "Whisks is free in this town tonjitht."

His shuffling steps retreated down the corridor, darkness flowed back

as the door slammed behind him.

Lane's gaze went desperately to the narrow window that framed the glimmering star. Too high for him to reach—and too small, even if he

could climb up to those bars and wrench them loose.

Sam Hally had left town, so Stokes had intimated, and the sheriff. Lane began to have a shrewd suspicion of the truth. If Sam really had left town it was for the purpose of enlisting aid, or perhaps Jim Brent had demanded to see the papers proving Lane's identity. It was quite possible the old HM man had returned to the ranch intending to get the papers Lane had turned over to him for safekeeping. It was quite possible too that the sheriff had been lured away by a fake message. It was all within the probabilities that the cunning brain of the unknown arch-plotter was responsible for the sequence of events that promised a helpless victim for an insensate mob.

Lane's eyes sought the winking star in the window. There was one man who must know the identity of his unknown enemy—one other man besides old Cimarron Smith. The portly lawyer from Chicago, Judson C. Falk, self-styled president of the OK Land and Cattle Company. Falk was the man he had risked his life to interview, an interview so disastrously blocked by the arrival of Ash Burr.

Falk was the key to the mystery. Even if he were only a tool, Falk

would know the name of his scheming master.

Lane's jaws set grimly. He felt suddenly surprisingly cool and unafraid.

The door of the corridor was opening stealthily. Lane barely caught the faint rasp of the rusted hinge, but this time no light flooded into the dark tunnel.

For a long moment no further sound reached him. Lane put his ear

to the iron grille, presently caught the sound of low whispering voices. At least two men were hesitating in the passage. Dan Stokes would be one of them. Lane made no attempt to guess the identity of the jailer's companion.

His guess about Dan Stokes proved correct. The man's voice sud-

denly came loudly, and drunkenly quarrelsome.

"Aw, no sense foolin' in the dark thisaways. Was enough of that

stuff in the bottle to lay a mule out stiff."

"All right, get yore lantern. Gotta make shore he's drunk the stuff."
Lane repressed a start! Ash Burr's voice! It was from the OK foreman that the flask of whisky had come!

His hand closed over the bottle he had unthinkingly shoved into his pocket. It was not unnatural for Stokes to think he had made use of the liquor, hungry and parched after the long hours in the stifling cell. They were expecting to find him lying dead or unconscious.

He threw off the momentary horror that seized him. He might have taken a long drink from the flask, discovered too late that the whisky

was poisoned.

Lane smiled grimly, drew the flash from his pocket, and pulled the cork. The pungent odor of raw whisky was strong. He emptied the bottle, sprayed its contents over the floor, and over the litter of foul straw in the far corner.

A light suddenly glimmered in the corridor. Lane heard the tread of approaching feet. His visitors were making no further attempt to

conceal their presence.

He stretched himself face down on the straw, the flask clutched in outflung hand. These men were expecting to find a dead man. He hoped he would look very dead. He wanted them to unlock that door —come very close.

They came down the corridor. Lane guessed from those unsteady, lurching footsteps that both men were quite drunk. He was pleased. The element of surprise, their intoxicated condition, would work in his favor, would shorten the desperately long odds against him.

There was a brief silence; then suddenly light flowed into the cell

from the lantern lifted to the grille in the door.

"Layin' there stiff, like I told yuh," exulted the jailer. He spoke

thickly.

"Shore is," muttered his companion. He laughed, a mirthless, drunken chortle of triumph. "Smell's powerful strong, that whisky. Must have spilled a lot when he keeled over." Burr's low voice took on a vicious edge. "Unlock the door, Dan. I want to make shore the skunk ain't playin' Injun on us."

A key rasped in the lock.

Lane held his breath, tightened his clasp on the empty whisky

bottle. He was desperately afraid that his hammering heart would betray him.

A shadow fell across the straw in front of him.

Burr stared down at the inert form.

"Reckon the jasper is dead all right," muttered the man.

. Lane heard the jailer's shuffling, lurching feet come to a standstill several feet away.

"Gotta make shore," the foreman said. "Reckon I'll turn him over. Want to look at his face. . . ."

Lane smelled the man's hot, alcoholic breath as he bent down, felt a hand on his shoulder. He turned his head slightly-glimpsed sudden astonishment and horror on Burr's face. Coolly and accurately. Lane measured the head so close to him. The

bottle in his hand swept a short arc and crashed against the foreman's temple. The latter slumped down on his face. Lane snatched the man's gun from its holster and bounded with the speed of a cat to his feet.

"Keep as you are, Stokes!" The gun in his hand menaced the stupefied jailer. Lane darted a brief glance at the prostrate Burr. The man was entirely out for the time being. "Turn around," he said to Stokes.

The jailer obeyed. The lantern in his shaking hand threw distorted shadows on the walls. Lane moved close to him, plucked his gun from holster, and jerked the bunch of keys from his unresisting fingers.

"Yuh cain't get away with it," muttered Stokes hoarsely. "Yuh'll run into a hundred fellers out in the street. They'll swing yuh-"

"Shut up," ordered Lane curtly. His mind was racing. The thing had come upon him so swiftly there had been no time to plan succeeding moves. He attacked the problem coolly. The immediate step must be to make certain that these men could not give the alarm.

"We was only aimin' to get you away from here afore the mob come to get vuh," gibbered the jailer. "Burr tipped me off. We knowed

they'd be too many for me. I couldn't pertect yuh—"
"You're a lying scoundrel," Lane told him, "I heard you and Burr talking about the poisoned whisky." His gun pressed hard against the man's back. "I've a mind to send a bullet through your spine."

Stokes began to shake, his knees wobbled under him. "Don't yuh pull trigger, mister," he gasped. "I-I ain't stoppin' vuh from leavin'

here."

"You bet you're not," rasped Lane. He stared at the jailer's fallen companion. "The joke is on you and Burr," he chuckled grimly. "The bottle of poisoned whisky sure boomeranged on you two killers." His gun continued to bore firmly against the man's backbone. "Unfasten those handcuffs from your belt," he went on.

Stokes obeyed. Lane jerked them from his fingers, and in a moment the man's hands were securely locked behind his back.

Lane now tore the jailer's dirty bandanna from his neck and hastily fashioned a gag, which he forced into the man's jaws and made fast. Another brief glance at the prostrate Burr told him the man was still unconscious.

"All right." He prodded Stokes with the gun. "You can have a cell

nice and private, mister."

Stokes preceded him into the corridor. Lane followed with the lantern and the bunch of jail keys.

"Here's a nice little suite for you, Stokes," he said, unlocking one of the doors. "Here—wait a moment. . . ." He fumbled in the man's pockets, found the key to the handcuffs. . . . "All right, in with you."

He shut and locked the door and sped down the corridor to the jailer's office. A kerosene lamp burned smokily, and by its light he found what he needed, a second pair of handcuffs and leg-irons. Lane seized them and went swiftly back to his own cell.

Burr was sitting up dazedly and rubbing his sore head. Lane gave

him a chilly smile.

The foreman was too dazed to offer any resistance to the handcuffs and leg-irons. Lane ripped the gaudy silk bandanna from his prisoner's buil-throat and stooped over him.

"Who's your boss?" he asked. "Who is the man you take orders

from, Burr? The man who told you to murder me?"

The OK foreman glared up at him.

"Go to hell!" he grunted.

"I'm not wasting time with you," Lane told him crisply. He forced the gag into Burr's mouth and made it secure.

"Too bad for you if your drunk friends swing you from a tree before they discover their mistake," he said grimly. "Adios, Burr. Seems that every time we tangle you have awful bad luck."

The foreman's eyes cursed him as he went out and locked the door

behind him.

Lane looked in on the jailer and finished the job by securing the man's feet with the other pair of leg-irons. He left Stokes gurgling curses and sped on his way to the jail office. His own gun and holster hung from a peg. He buckled on the belt, blew out the lamp, and cautiously opened the door.

19

THE LATE MOON HAD NOT yet lifted above the mountains, and an overcast sky veiled the stars. There was a threat of rain in the cool, damp puffs of air that greeted Lane. He filled his lungs gratefully.

A narrow but deep gully ran west in the direction of Murphy's barn.

He climbed down the slope and worked his way along the gully, careful to avoid stepping on the dry brush that wind had blown over the banks.

He moved without haste, pausing every few feet to listen intently. His only fear was that somebody might know of Burr's visit to the jail, and wonder at his prolonged absence and investigate.

The thought sent an unpleasant tingle through him. An alarm now would be disastrous to certain plans he had in mind.

A lot depended on Murphy.

Lane had thought it all out during those last hectic minutes in jail. Success depended upon his own cool and swift action.

Murphy's big livery barn loomed out of the darkness.

Lane paused to consider his next step. He was not afraid of Murphy. He knew the liveryman was a friend of Sam Hally, decent and lawabiding. His danger would come from some chance lounger who might recognize him.

Horses' hoofs drummed up the street, and Lane, watching from the chaparral behind the barn, saw two riders pull up at the door. Cowboys, in for a Saturday night's spree. He heard their voices in loud banter with Murphy, and presently the two punchers went clumping hurriedly up the board walk.

Lane waited until their footsteps died away, using the time to toss the bunch of jail keys and the two handcuff keys into a clump of greasewood. Ash Burr and the jailer would be greatly annoved and do considerable swearing before their wrists were free of those steel handcuffs. It would be a job for the blacksmith.

He rounded the barn and approached the wide-open doors from the far side. A big kerosene lantern made a pale glow in front of the entrance. Lane's glance went up the street. Nobody coming. He took a deep breath, walked boldly into Murphy's tiny office.

The little Irishman looked up sleepily from his chair, tipped back against the wall. Lane stepped quickly into the shadows.

Anybody 'round, Murphy?" he asked softly.

The liveryman's feet slid off his desk, startled recognition suddenly in his eyes. He got slowly out of his chair. He stared for a brief moment, flicked a glance at the gun in Lane's hand.

"You know me, Murphy?"

The man nodded, jerked a thumb at the door behind him. "Slip back into that empty stall vonder," he said quietly, "Safer for ye, I'm thinkin'."

Reassured by the friendly voice, Lane obeyed. The liveryman closed the door and followed at his heels to the dark stall.

"Ye'll be needin' yore gray bronc," Murphy said, in the same calm

tone. "Sam left the gray stabled here. Didn't say you'd be in tonight, though."

"You won't give me away, Murphy?"

"I don't go back on Sam Hally's friend." Murphy's tone was annoy-ed, "It's tickled I am to see you, lad, an' lucky for you I'm open late this night." He gave Lane an admiring look. "We'll no waste time talkin', lad. You'll be wantin' to make dust out of this town."

"I'll need an extra horse," Lane said simply. "And plenty of tough

rope," he added.

Murphy nodded, and without further comment he led Lane down behind the stalls.

"There's yore gray." He gestured at the munching horse. "I'll be gettin' a saddle on this brown mare whilst you saddle yore bronc."

They worked swiftly, and Murphy led the brown mare to the rear of the stable, Lane following with the tall gray.

"Best for you to go out the back way," muttered the liveryman. He slid the door partly open, and Lane went through with the horses.

He swung into his saddle. Murphy's smile reached up to him through

"Good luck to you, lad!"

"Thanks, Murphy. I'll not forget this." Lane reached down and shook the liveryman's horny hand. "I'll get the brown mare back to you soon."

"I ain't worryin'," reassured Murphy. "On yore way, lad. 'Tis pleased I am to help you to get the laugh on them murderin' wolves."

The big door slid softly shut. Lane rode away, walking the horses and heading for the deep arroyo that he remembered looped to the left and ran its twisting course behind the Cattleman's Hotel.

He reached the wide boulder-strewn floor of the wash and followed the windings for some ten minutes, until his searching eyes caught the dim outline of a butte lifting high against the night skyline. The lone butte marked the location of the hotel, as yet beyond his vision.

Lane climbed from his saddle and carefully made the horses fast behind a thicket of stunted willows, beyond possible view from the steep

bank of the wash.

He stood for a moment, gazing grimly up at the shadowy bulk of the big butte. The purpose in his mind was foolbardy, perhaps would result in disaster, but he had come to San Carlos to interview Judson C. Falk. It was not in Lane Mory's make-up to be easily turned from his purpose. He had come to certain conclusions while languishing in the San Carlos jail, conclusions that more than ever strengthened his determination to have a talk with the self-styled president of the OK Land and Cattle Company.

He worked his way up the steep slope cautiously, thankful for the

pitch darkness of the night. The stars had entirely disappeared behind lowering clouds.

The hotel, from where he viewed the building, was in darkness, save for a light in an upper window. Lane crept forward, a vague shadow in the blackness as he moved alongside the wall to the front porch. He paused for a look up and down the street. A pair of cowboys were arguing drunkenly in front of the Horsehead. He saw they were too preoccupied to pay him any attention, and even as he watched them the two men suddenly lurched back through the red swing-doors.

The street was deserted, ominously quiet. Lane sensed that the more decent citizens had discreetly retired for the night. Only from the saloon came the sounds of drunken revelry, the high shrieks of the dance-hall girls, the clamor of rough voices. Heavy feet were stamp-

ing to the accompaniment of the tinny piano.

A light burned in the hotel lobby, and there was a faint gleam in Weller's office window. The hotel man evidently had not yet retired. It might prove disastrous if Weller chanced to see him, Lane reflected. The man might be willing to help him-more probably he'd raise the alarm. Weller would distrust the stealthy appearance of the man he thought safe in jail. Also Lane was not inclined to trust the Buddhalike hotel proprietor. The man had not been too ready to help when Burr tried to kill him that morning,

Lane mounted the three steps noiselessly. A lone horse was tied to the hitch-rail, he noticed, and suddenly he was walking boldly but softly into the lobby. The same lugubrious-faced man was half dozing behind the desk. He looked up, blinked sleepy eyes at the tall newcomer bending over him.

"No noise," warned Lane. His gun rested on the desk, pointed directly at the clerk's stomach. "Take me up to Falk's room."

Astonishment and fear clashed in the man's eyes. He shook his head

sullenly, darted a glance at the shelf below the desk.

"No chance to go for your gun," Lane warned softly. "Get moving. Take me up to Falk's room." His gun lifted, "Put your hands up, and keep them up." The clerk got to his feet, teeth bared in a vicious snarl. Lane heard

the faint murmur of voices from Weller's office-Weller's high nasal tones, the frightened, smothered voice of a woman. Lane's blood curdled.

"What is going on in there?" He gestured in the direction of the side passage that led to Weller's office. "Keep your voice down," he added.

The man hesitated, and his eyes took on a crafty look. "One of the girls from across the street," he muttered. "Some hombre tried to beat her up, an' she wants the boss to have him throwed in the calaboose." "Does Weller own the Horsehead?" Lane's eves widened a bit.

"Shore he owns the Horsehead," grinned the clerk, "Owns most all of this town. Weller does."

"Get moving!" Lane gestured at the stairs. He had an uneasy feeling that the man was lying about the woman in Weller's office, but time was precious. "Make it quiet," he warned again. "I'm right behind

The clerk was careful to heed the warning. He went soft-footed up the stairs. Lane followed closely, gun pressed against the man's back, He would have been startled could he have seen the latter's malicious grin.

He heard the sound of a door opening down in the lobby as they reached the landing, and felt, rather than saw, Manuel's glittering eyes peering up at them. The next moment he was following his guide down the dark corridor.

The Mexican glided back to Weller's office.

"Some man wanting a room," he informed his boss. "Frank has taken him up." He shrugged his shoulders, gaze on the girl huddled in a chair. "Too drunk to find his room," he surmised.

Weller nodded, stared at the white-cheeked girl in the opposite chair. "When Frank comes down tell him Miss Randall will want one of our

nicest rooms, Manuel," he said softly.

It was in Lane Mory's smoothly functioning mind that it would be some time before the clerk would resume his post at the desk, and when the man sullenly unlocked a door at the end of the passage he motioned for him to precede him into the room.

Falk was lying on the rumpled bed, fully dressed, save for his new

boots, which hurt his feet.

He ierked up from the pillows and stared with terrified eves at his silent-footed visitors. The dim lamplight showed his ghastly face, all

color drained from his usually ruddy cheeks.

"What have they got you locked up in your room for, Falk?" Lanc's tone was puzzled. He went on quickly, "Never mind, I'm taking you for a little ride. You can tell me later." He tossed the quaking lawyer a short piece of cord. "Tie this fellow's hands for me, Falk. Make a good job of it-and quick."

An odd relief flowed into Falk's bulging eyes. He slid off the bed

and hastily bound the clerk's wrists with the cord.

"Pick up your boots," Lane next ordered. "Nothing else. I'm in a hurry." Falk's gaze flickered at the pillow on the bed, then he hurriedly

reached for the discarded boots. "I don't know what your game is, Mory," he muttered, "but any-

thing is better than staying here to be murdered."

Lane gestured him aside. He wanted to see what the pillow concealed. Keeping his gun on the two men, he turned the pillow over, disclosed a large envelope. Lane picked it up and pushed it inside his shirt. Falk's sly look had betrayed him.

He marched his prisoners out to the hall, relocked the door, and

pocketed the key.

"Where's the back stairs?" he asked Frank.

"Ain't no back stairs," muttered the sneering-eyed clerk.

Lane sensed the man was lying, was hoping desperately to force him to return down the front stairs to the lobby. Falk came to his aid.

"That door," he said. "Stairs there-down to the kitchen quarters." Lane herded them to the indicated door.

"You go first, Falk," he ordered. "I'm keeping my gun on this man's back. Don't try any tricks," he added grimly.

"I told you anything is better than staying here to be murdered,"

repeated the lawyer, in a frantic whisper.

They descended into the vawning blackness of the steep and narrow stairs and were suddenly in the huge kitchen, which was mercifully empty. Falk led the way out to the yard, Lane close at the desk-clerk's heels, gun pressed against the man's cringing spine.

"Keep moving," he directed, as Falk hesitated, "Head for that

butte."

In single file they stumbled through the darkness, down the slope to the boulder-strewn floor of the arroyo. Lane picked out the clump of willows and drove his prisoners forward to the concealed horses. His spirits were soaring with renewed hope.

"You'll find a rope on that saddle-horn," he told Falk. "Tie this

bird up, and make those knots tight," he warned.

"You bet I'll make 'em tight," muttered the lawyer. Perspiration

beaded his round cheeks, despite the cool, damp air.

He worked swiftly, swathed the man's arms and legs in the coil of hope old Murphy had so obligingly supplied, and completed the job with a very effective gag contrived from a balled-up handkerchief which he stuffed in the clerk's mouth and tied with a buckskinn thong Lane directed him to cut from the saddle. They left the unfortunate man lying bound and gagged in the clump of willows and rode up the arroyo.

"I'm trusting you not to make a break, Falk," warned Lane. "Don't

want to waste time stopping to tie you fast to the saddle."

"No chance for me to make a break," groaned the lawyer. "I'd fall off first jump this horse took. I ain't no cowboy, Mory. Never was on a horse before."

They pushed on as rapidly as the darkness and the rough going permitted, Falk bouncing precariously in his saddle and clinging desperately to the pommel.

Lightning flared across the sky, thunder rumbled from distant mountain peaks. More ominous was the reverberating crash of a rifle that stabbed through the darkness from the town behind them.

20

ROSE RANDALL WAS FRIGHTENED. She knew that never before in her life had she known such real fear.

"I've no intention of staving the night," she protested, "Really, Mr. Weller, my only purpose here is to help Lane Mory. We must get him out of this town before it is too late."

He wagged his great bald head sorrowfully.

"Unfortunately the sheriff was called away, as I explained, Miss Randall. It is a matter for the sheriff. I am powerless."

"You must help him," begged the girl. "You are an important man, Mr. Weller. The sheriff will approve. He is a good man. Please, Mr. Weller-get Lane out of that dreadful jail. He can go back to the ranch with me. There are places where he can hide until Sheriff Brent can protect him."

"Impossible," regretted the hotel man. The odd gleam in his small red eyes was more pronounced, sent an unpleasant tingle through the girl. "I'm inclined to regard your fears for the young man as quite foolish, Miss Randall," he went on blandly. "In the meantime you must not think of riding back to the ranch at this late hour-and a storm threatening-"

Rose stood up, slim and straight and determined, small brown hand

toying with the butt of the .32 in her holster.

"I find you most disappointing, Mr. Weller." Her tone was frigid. "I don't know where else to turn for help in this town. Ed Frake seems to be away from home, and I really don't know anybody else-except Mike Murphy-" Rose faltered, stared apprehensively at the window. The curtains were drawn, and she could not see into the street, but the sounds were unmistakeable-the hoarse voices and shouts of drunken men. 'The girl's cheeks whitened, she threw Luke Weller an appealing glance.

"Sit down." There was a new edge to the hotel man's wheezy voice. "No more riding for you tonight, young woman. I'll have a nice room fixed up for you."

"Those men . . ." faltered the girl. "It's dreadful, Mr. Weller. Listen! They're going to the jail. I could hear that man yelling something about a rope." Her fingers tightened over the ivory handle of the little gun. "I can't stand it!" she gasped. "I-I won't let them!"

Weller disregarded her. "Manuel!" His voice lifted. "See what's keeping Frank so long. Tell him to prepare a room for the senorita." "Si. senor."

The Mexican glided from his curtained alcove, lifted his lip in a faint and cruel smile as he caught Weller's significant look at the girl.

"I don't want your room!" Rose spoke furiously. "I'm not staying! I'm going to Lane. I'll not let that mob harm him!" She turned impetuously to run from the place, felt a sinewy hand suddenly grasp her wrist.

"No!" The Mexican's smile was wicked. "The senorita is not leaving now."

She jerked at her gun. He wrenched it from her fingers, threw it contemptuously into a corner. The girl's hand swung up hard against the man's swarthy face. He pinioned her arms, pushed her into her

chair. "The senorita is not leaving," he repeated softly. He held her, squirming and struggling and kicking. Weller pulled open a desk

drawer. "Make sure, Manuel," he said tonelessly, and tossed the Mexican a short hair rope.

In a moment he had her lashed to the back of the chair. Her first burst of fury subsided; she went limp, could only stare with disbelieving, horrified eyes at the inscrutable Buddha-like face opposite. Her breath came in convulsive, painful gasps that shook her.

"I like to have my way about things," Weller told her, in the same toneless voice. "It's why I'm a successful man, young woman."

"I—I'll scream," she said in a breathless, whispering voice. "I—I don't understand—only that you've gone mad—"

Weller made his limp gesture. "Who's to hear you scream?" His weasel eves sneered. "Listen. Plenty of girls screamin' out in the street."

Rose closed her eyes, her head back. That satanic bedlam in the street . . . the high shrieks of drunken dance-hall women . . . the vells and curses of liquor-maddened men . . . the vilest scum of the border howling like wolves on the blood trail . . . the voice of the mob.

She forced herself to a semblance of coolness, tried to still the tumult of her pounding heart.

"What do you want?" she managed to ask.

"You."

Rose could only stare at him, unutterable loathing in her eyes. She made herself speak finally.

"You want me?"

His great bald pate nodded at her. "Mebbe you can understand why I ain't carin' much what happens to young Mory," he said, with a wheezy laugh. "Already had it in for that young man, but you comin' all worried about him, an' as good as telling me you're in love with him, has signed his death warrant twice over."

"You-you already hated Lane Mory?" Bewilderment widened her

eyes.

"Ain't hatin' him exactly." Luke Weller spoke placidly. "He come here upsetting my plans, and when a man tries to upset my plans—gets in my way—I mighty soon eliminate him. You see, Rose, young Mory is old Keith's grandson—or mebbe that ain't news to you." His wicked, silent laughter rocked him.

She shook her head, stared at him, her lips parted, hand pressed to

her breast.

"Well, he is; and that would make him owner of the OK ranch." Weller nodded his massive head. "That's why the feller'll soon be danglin' from a tree. He won't be troublin' me no more. His own fault for gettin' in my way—interferin' with my plans about the OK ranch." Weller made his limp but terrible gesture. "Mory's done for. He won't bother me no more."

Rose scarcely heard him. Lane—Lane Mory—the grandson of Owen Keith. Lane—her brave young tenderfoot—doomed to death through

the satanic plotting of this monster. She sat speechless.

Weller spoke brusquely to the Mexican.

"See what's keepin' Frank so long upstairs," he directed. "Tell him to fix up that room—the one with the bars in the window."

"Si. senor."

Manuel moved with his cat-like stealth towards the door. Rose scarcely noticed him go, nor the evil smile he gave her from over his shoulder.

"Sent the sheriff on a wild-goose chase," Luke Weller was telling her

in his wheezy voice.

Rose dragged herself from the mire of her confused thoughts.

"Why do you tell me all these things?" she asked faintly. "What have I done to you? What did my grandfather do that you murdered him, or had him murdered?" She stared at him, her eyes bright and hard. "I'm sure now that you are the murderer."

Weller eyed her intently. He seemed suddenly oddly concerned. He turned to the desk and rummaged in a drawer for the bottle of whisky he seldom touched himself. His hand was steady, his movements unhurried but swift and sure, as he poured a generous drink into a glass.

Infuriated yells floated in from across the street. The mob was surging back from the jail, and Weller heard booted feet pounding up

the planked sidewalk.

He stood listening, a hint of alarm in his eyes, the glass of whisky in his hand. The uproar drew nearer, excited, clamoring voices. The

uneasiness in the hotel man's eyes grew more pronounced. Something was wrong.

The man running up the sidewalk was suddenly clumping into the hotel lobby. Weller's gaze went to the door. Ash Burr burst in, the chains of a leg-iron clanking at his heels. The big foreman glowered at him from the doorway, and the startled Weller saw that handcuffs bound his wrists together.

"He got away from us!" Burr shook his manacled fists with impotent rage. "Mory got clean away—tricked me!" Oaths frothed from the foreman's snarling lips. "Left me an' Stokes hog-tied." He glowered down at the leg-iron still clamped to one boot. "Chopped it loose soon as I got hold of an axe." He swore furiously. The skunk throwed the kevs away. Cain't get these damn' cuffs off with no axe."

Weller continued to stare at him. There was a murderous gleam in his eyes.

"Got the best of you, huh, Burr?" Weller's tone was deadly for all its softness. "Seems like young Mory is too smart for you, Ash."

There was no reply from the OK foreman. He was staring stupidly at the girl huddled in the chair. Her eyes were wide open, and very bright with a great gladges.

bright with a great gladness.
"What's she doin' here?" Burr's look went to the fat man. "What's Rose doin' here—tied up in that chair?" There was mounting suspi-

cion and jealousy in his snarled question.

Weller's gaze went past him to the Mexican gliding swiftly in from

the lobby. The swarthy man's eyes sparkled with excitement.
"Senor!" he gasped. "Frank not upstairs. He no place I look!"

Manuel gestured fiercely. "He no place—he gone!"

Still Luke Weller stared at him, the brimming glass in his hand. He

saw that the Mexican had more to tell.
"It is strange, senor," puzzled Manuel. "That hombre Falk, he have

vanish'. He no in his room."

The glass of whisky fell from Weller's fingers, splintered on the floor. He took a tottering step, caught at the desk with one hand.

"Falk—gone—" There was stark fear in the hotel man's voice.

"His door was locked, but the key no there. I break in. He no in room. He have vanish'." Manuel gestured expressively.

Weller glared at him. He knew now that the cowboy Manuel had glimpsed going up the stairs with Frank must have been Lane Mory. He had broken jail, coolly come to the hotel, forced the lawyer to accompany him. The fat was in the fire. Falk knew enough to hang him.

The man would squeal, tell the story of the forged deed.

Ash Burr pulled his stupefied gaze from the girl. Fury, jealously, flamed in his bloodshot eyes. "I'm wantin' to know what you're doin' with Rose tied up in that chair."

Weller's gaze swung to him. Burr was the man who had allowed Mory to escape. The hotel man's eyes glittered.

"You fool, you've ruined me!" He went with his surprisingly light

step to Burr. "Get out of here before I kill you!"

His small, pudgy-looking hands whirled the big man around, and he rushed him headlong to the door. A startled, smothered oath tumbled from the latter's blood-smeared lips chafed raw by the gag Lane had forced into his mouth. He put his manacled hands against Weller's chest, tried to push him away.

The hotel man's strength was amazing. There were mighty muscles under the rolls of fat. The powerful OK foreman might have been a child in those two soft-looking hands. The Mexican watched, his beady, bright eyes gleaming, a hand on the haft of his wicked-looking knife.

He was like a great cat, crouching for the kill.

"Get out of here," repeated Weller, in a stifled whisper. He rushed Burr through the door, flung him staggering into the hall. Rose heard an anguished bellow, a crash, as the OK man went sprawling on his face.

Weller reappeared, closed and locked the door, and went swiftly to a large, old-fashioned safe. Manuel watched him in silence, hand toying with his knife. Weller, kneeling before the big safe, suddenly glanced around at him.

"The horses," he said, in the same stifled whisper. "Quick, make haste!"

"Si, senor. I tell Pedro Castillo". He slid away on his soundless feet. Rose ast in the chair, rigid and horribly afraid. She could hear Weller feverishly busy at the safe. Papers rustled, and she heard the clink of gold. He was hurriedly transferring certain portable possessions to the canvas bag he had snatched from a peg on the wall.

He was suddenly by her side. She saw that the panic had left him. He was smiling down at her, the inscrutable, bland smile that had al-

ways marked him.

"It might have been worse," he told her softly. "In a way it is my own fault for leaving to a fool a job I should have given my personal attention."

Rose stared up at the big pink face, only half understanding what he meant.

"I told Burr to kill Mory," Weller went on. "Wasn't sure about the lynchin', so told Burr to make sure. But Mory was too smart for the fool—got away, and took Falk with him. That's why I'm going away too." Weller nodded his Buddha-like head. "Mory's smart—knew Falk could tell him things—and that's why we're headin' for the border tonight."

She tried to speak, could only shake her head in protest.

"I'm finished in San Carlos," Weller went on, "but I've done right smart for myself." He nodded again. "Was always careful not to be caught nappin'. Got plenty hid away. Got a big ranch down in Mexico." His smile embraced her, sent cold shivers through her. "I aim to take things easy, live like a king—with you—down in Mexico. I'll cover you with diamonds. You'll have servants, fine clothes, the fat of the land." He made his limp gesture of satisfaction. "Nothin' too good for my wife."

"You beast!" defied the girl. She broke off, stared with quick hope at the lobby door. Heavy fists hammered on the panels: Burr's voice

shouted maledictions.

Manuel made his silent appearance, nodded at his chief.

"Pedro will have the horses waiting, senor."

"Take the bag," directed Weller.

Thundering blows shook the lobby door, it burst open with a crash of splintering wood. Burr charged in like a madman.

"You double-crossin' coyote!" His manacled hands fastened over Weller's throat. "I'm not lettin' you harm Rose!"

She screamed again. Too late Burr glimpsed the Mexican leaping towards him, knife in clenched hand. The blade glittered, sank deep in the foreman's side. He groaned, gave the horified girl a pitiful look of mingled remorse and despair, and slowly collapsed.

Weller looked down at him for a moment.

"Always was kind of scared of that knife of yours, Burr was," he said callously. "Seemed to think you'd sink it into his ribs some day."

21

TIM HOOK RODE INTO TOWN, a pair of grim-eyed old cowboys at his back. The street was strangely quiet. The Horsehead Saloon was closed up tight. Only the hotel showed any sign of life. The kerosene lamp was still burning in the lobby.

The gaunt Lazy R foreman swung from his saddle and went stamping up the porch steps. Lanky Hull and Ben Roe followed at his heels. The weather-bitten faces of the three men betraved gnawing anxiety.

The lobby was deserted.

"Nobody around," muttered the tall foreman worriedly.

"Gone to bed mebbe," suggested Ben Roe. "She wouldn't be settin' around here this time o' night."

Lanky Hull stared up at the clock behind the desk. "Mornin', you mean." he corrected. "It's all of two in the mornin'."

"She'd be in bed if she's here," observed Tim Hook. "Trouble is we don't know for shore that Rose is here."

"Somebody comin'," muttered the lynx-eared Lanky Hull.

Their hands went to holstered guns. They were jumpy, these three old men who had come looking for the young mistress of the Lazy R ranch. Anxiety had frayed nerves raw.

They listened tensely.

"Somebody kind of draggin' hisself 'long the floor," muttered Tim.
The same dreadful surmise showed on their faces. Rose—hurt . . .

The old foreman jerked his gun from holster, went leaping around the corner into the side passage that led to Weller's office. Ben and Lanky raced at his heels.

The man pulling himself painfully along the floor lifted his head, showed a white, contorted face.

Tim Hook halted abruptly, smothered an oath.

"Ash Burr!" he ejaculated.

For a moment the three men could only stare, astonished eyes taking in the manacled hands, the leg-chains dangling from one boot, the ominous trail of blood on the floor.

The OK man's eyes beckoned imploringly. He lay there on his stomach, gasping, entreating them to come close. Tim Hook bent down to him. He hated Ash Burr, but it was plain the man was dying, that he wanted to tell them something—something important.

"Listen, Tim." Burr's voice came in a gasping whisper. "Weller . . . Weller . . . He's got Rose—taken Rose with him—"

The Lazy R men exchanged shocked looks.

"Weller's a devil," went on the dying man, with a tremendous effort. "Get word to Mory..."

Tim interrupted brusquely. "Mory's in jail, ain't he? Or lynched."
"He got loose." Burr's voice came stronger. "Tim—Mory is—is old
Keith's grandson, the—real boss of the OK. Go tell him Weller's gone
with Rose. He's the only man can beat that devil. . . . He'll be headin'
for—for—" Blood gushed from the dying OK man's mouth, he was
suddenly very still, eves wide and starine.

Tim Hook straightened up. "He's gone," he said briefly. His gaze followed the trail of blood leading into the office. "Way I figger it, he tried to stop Weller, an' that Mex o' Weller's knifed him." The foreman's face was drawn and haggard. "Went afore he could tell us

where Weller was headin' for."

"He said to tell Mory," reminded Lanky Hull.

"To hell with Mory!" snarled Ben Roe. "We're pickin' up Weller's trail our own selves."

"I don't savvy about Weller," puzzled old Tim. "What would he run off with Rose for?" He shook his head. "Seems to me Ash got things twisted. He means it was Mory that's run off with Rose. Broke jail, grabbed her, an' headed for the border, mos' likely." "We're wastin' time," fumed Lanky. "Ash said Weller, an' if it's Weller he'll be headin' God knows where. Come on. We gotta scatter—look for sign."

They clattered out to their horses and swung into saddles.

"Listen!" Lanky lifted a hand. "Horses comin'—an' on the jump!" The newcomers roared up the street, some half-score riders.

"Im Brent!" ejaculated Tim. "An' Clem Sanders an' his boys."

The wiry little sheriff climbed stiffly from his saddle. He was very angry. He'd been deliberately hoaxed, and he was wanting to ask Luke Weller some pointed questions. The tale brought to him by Pedro Castillo had been bait to get him out of San Carlos. The sheriff was worried. He smelled disatser in the air. The street was too quiet, the saloon doors closed. He'd broken his promise to Sam Hally. The old law-officer had a ghastly premonition that he would find Lane Mory dangling from a nearby tree.

"The town's too quiet," he muttered to Clem. "Looks like we're

too late."

Tim Hook spoke from his saddle.

"Hello, Jim. Shore glad to see you. The devil's been loose in this town."

Sheriff Brent stifled a groan. "You mean they got Mory-strung

him up?" He gave Clem a dismayed look.

"It's worse than that," replied Tim huskily. "Rose come kitin' to town to help this Mory hombre, an' either him or Luke Weller has run off with her. Ain't got what happened really figgered out yet."

The sheriff stared at him, bewildered. "Mory... what about young Mory?" He snapped out the question impatiently. "You mean he got away. Tim?"

"Reckon he did, Jim." The Lazy R foreman gave a brief account of

Ash Burr's death.

"It wouldn't be Mory who's run off with the girl," promptly declared

the sheriff. "Mory is Owen Keith's grandson, Tim."

"Ash was sayin' somethin' about Mory bein' the real boss of the OK," admitted Tim. "I thought he was kind of out of his head, an', what with bein' so upset about Rose, his talk didn't sink in, I guess," Tim looked at Ben and Lanky, "Mory bein' old Cap Keith's grandson explains why he had the Sharps rifle. Looks like we was shore wrong jumpin' him like we did."

"Queer about Weller," mused the sheriff. "Something must have

scared him plenty-him running off."

"Td say he's back of all this dirty work that's been goin' on," shrewdly guessed Clem Sanders. "He figgered to get Mory lynched, got scared when Mory broke jail, and beat it. Reckon he's headed for the border, like Ash Burr told Tim."

"Don't make good sense," grumbled Jim Brent. "What would Weller want with Rose?" He turned to his horse.

"Clem," he went on briskly, "you and yore boys make tracks for the OK. There's a chance Weller might head for the ranch." Bern slapped a hard thigh. He was beginning to see light. "Weller wanted Mory out of the way because he figgered to get hold of the OK for himself," he told the others. "It's a safe bet hell make tracks to the ranch on the way to the border to get him fresh broncs."

"Reckon we'll ride with you, Clem," decided Tim Hook. His tone

was grim.

Footsteps came to them, a man running up the middle of the street. "Murphy!" exclaimed the sheriff, as a vague shape drew out of the darkness. "He'll mebbe have news."

The liveryman came up, breathless and excited.

"Thought you'd want to know what happened while you was gone, Jim."

The sheriff fired a question uppermost in their minds.

"Seen anything of Rose Randall?"

"No," answered Murphy, surprised. "Why, Jim?"

"She's been took off," the sheriff told him. "We figger it's Luke Weller."

Murphy swore softly. "Young Mory broke jail," he went on with his tale. "Come to the barn and got his gray bronc. Said he wanted another bronc, so I let him have my brown mare. Didn't say what he wanted another bronc for."

A dead silence greeted the liveryman's words.

"There was plenty hell when they went to the jail and found Mory had skipped town," Murphy went on. "All they found was Ash Burr, handcuffed and locked in Mory's cell, an' Dan Stokes locked up in another cell."

Tim Hook interrupted him. "You say he went off with two broncs?"

"He did," declared the liveryman.

"That settles it," snarled Ben Roe. "It's Mory that's run off with Rose."

"Shore looks that way," agreed Tim harshly. "Else why would he want two broncs?"

Murphy was frankly disturbed. "He wanted some extry rope," he said slowly. "Didn't say what for."

"We're wastin' time," rasped Lanky Hull. "I'll give that coyote some extry rope—good an' tight around his neck!"

"It don't add up right," muttered the liveryman. "Sam Hally wouldn't be friends with that kind of hombre. It's my idee you'll be wastin' valuable time chasin' him."

"Sam Hally, huh?" Tim Hook nodded grimly. "He'll mos' likely

head for the HM. Come on, fellers!" He swung the roan horse around.

Sheriff Brent came out of a brown study. "Wait a moment," he snapped. "Murphy's right! You won't be helping Rose if you go chasin' after Mory." He looked at the liveryman. "Does Weller keep his broncs with you, Mike?"

Murphy shook his head.

"He's got a barn in Old Town. A Mex name of Pedro Castillo runs it for him, takes care of his horses."

"Pedro Castillo!" Brent picked up his ears. "That's the hombre who sent me chasin' off on that fool trip." The sheriff's tone was wrathful. "Proves that Weller framed that little trick." He stared thoughtfully at the impatient Tim Hook. "It'll pay us to have a talk with Pedro Castillo-find out how many horses our friend Weller took along tonight."

He swung up to his saddle, looked down at Murphy, "Ash Burr is layin' dead in the hotel, Mike," he said. "Look after things for me, will you? Get Doc Simpson if you can find him."

"You bet," promised Murphy. "Burr's bunch lighted out for the ranch in a hurry when they learned Mory had broke jail. Might be a good idee to be right careful if you boys run into 'em out there."

"I'm cravin' to meet up with them killin' wolves," muttered Ben Roe. They spurred away in a cloud of dust. Murphy watched for a minute, went thoughfully up the porch steps. Several scantily clad men

were in the lobby.

"What's goin' on in this dump?" one of them questioned curiously. "Nobody around except a dead man layin' over in that passage. Cain't

find Frank, the desk man. Ain't in his room."

"All I know it that Weller's skipped this part of the country," Murphy told the wondering hotel guests. "The sheriff has left me in charge, and my advice is for you folks to go back to yore beds." He went into the dark passage for a look at the slain foreman. Murphy was feeling a bit glum. He yearned to be riding with the sheriff and helping to track down the scoundrel who had kidnapped pretty Rose Randall. He'd known Rose since her baby days.

"Hope Jim can make Pedro Castillo tell what he knows," he reflect-

ed. "That greaser will know plenty, I'm thinkin'."

The sheriff was not getting much information out of Pedro Castillo. "How many horses did Weller get from you?" questioned Brent. "Talk fast, hombre, an' no more of vore lies."

"The Senor Weller take three horses," the frightened Mexican confessed. "Also a horse with pack-saddle."

"Who went off with him?"

Pedro Castillo licked dry lips, glanced apprehensively at the circle of grim faces.

"I no see," he stammered.

"You're lyin'!" rasped Tim Hook, angrily starting forward.

"Let me do the talkin'," snapped the sheriff. He fixed the quaking may with cold, implacable eyes. "Weller got you to bring me that fake message about El Toro Rubio, didn't he, Pedro?"

"Si." Pedro began to tremble. "He tell me he play a little joke—"
"A joke that'll put you behind the bars for a long time, hombre,"

said the sheriff grimly.

"Senor, it was but a joke he say he make on you!" gasped the terrified Mexican

"Mebbe I might forget this little joke if you tell me all you know, Pedro. Talk fast, or I'm draggin' you off to the cuartel!"

"Si, Senor Sheriff, I tell what I know."

"Who went with Weller?"

"Manuel Lopez-and a senorita," confessed Pedro.

"Miss Randall? Was she the girl?"

The Mexican hesitated, looked uneasily at the hard, scowling faces of the Lazy R men.

"Si, senor," he finally mumbled.

"Were they usin' her rough, Pedro?"

"They no harm her, senor—only tie her with ropes to the horse—"

"Which way did they go, hombre?" broke in Tim Hook huskily.
"In o see which way," babbled the man. "I swear I no see. They ride away. It is dark. I no see."

"Guess he's told us all he knows," decided Jim Brent.

They left the man shivering in his doorway and rode gloomily up

the slope to the road. They pulled up at the fork.

"Me an' the boys is ridin' for the OK," Tim Hook announced brusquely. "I'm gamblin' Weller heads for the ranch. He'll need fresh brones."

The sheriff nodded. "You go with them," he directed the Box B man. "I've sworn you in as my deputy, and I want you to arrest any OK hombre you run into. If they try to shoot it out with you—"

"I get you," Sanders nodded. "Which way are you headin', Jim?" "Straight for the HM." the sheriff told him. "I ain't forgettin' what

"Straight for the HM," the sheriff told him. "I ain't forgettin' what Burr said to Tim about tellin' young Mory the news."

"Ash said Mory was the only man that could beat that devil," muttered Tim Hook.

"Judgin' from what he did tonight—breakin' out of that jail and leavin' Burr and Stokes in handcuffs—I'd say that tenderfoot is one shore enough man," chuckled the old sheriff. He waved them on their way. "All right, boys. Get movin'—an' good luck!"

Judson C. Falk was doing some very earnest thinking. There was no getting around the fact that he was in a tight hole. The more he pondered, the more frantic he became. Prison gates yawned for him, with perhaps a hangman in the offing. The prospects were decidedly unpleasant to say the least, wherefore the portly lawyer's crafty cogitations.

There was one loophole that offered a slim chance of escape. All Mr. Falk desired was an opportunity to leave the Spanish Sinks. He had taken a violent dislike to the West as a place of residence. Lane Mory, he shrewdly surmised, would know nothing of his past record, or that he was wanted by the police for several crimes, including murder. Mory's sole interest in him was for the purpose of forcing him to explain his connection with the OK Land and Cattle Company. There was a faint possibility that Mory would consent to turn him loose once he had gained the information that would entangle the threads of the amazing conspiracy to rob him of his great inheritance. The thought of turning the tables on Luke Weller tickled the lawyer's sense of humor. Weller would have murdered him in cold blood the moment he had written in the lacking signature on the forged deed. The man was a ruthless scoundrel, reflected Mr. Falk indignantly. It would be a meritorious deed to unmask the villain.

Mr. Falk smiled blandly up at his tall companion.

"I'll not pretend I don't know who you are or what you want with me, Mr. Mory," he began smoothly. "Weller told me this afternoon who you are."

"Weller told you?"

"I thought you'd prick up your ears," chuckled Falk. "You see, Mory, Weller hired me to do a little job for him. I can tell you a lot if you'll agree to turn me loose. All I want is a chance to get out of this damn' country."

Lane pulled the gray horse to a standstill.

"Keep on talking, Falk," he said quietly. "Where does Luke Weller come into this business?"

Lightning flashed across the black sky, followed by a deafening peal of thunder. The storm was drawing in from the mountains.

Falk repressed an apprehensive shiver. Thunderstorms always un-

nerved him, and that greenish flare of lightning had shown Lane's face, cold-eyed, grimly implacable.

"How about my little proposition?" he queried. His voice was shaky. "You'd be surprised—"

Lane stared at him thoughtfully. Falk had been locked in his room,

was in a state of terror when he and the hotel clerk walked in on him. It was obvious that Falk was afraid for his life. The man had been strangely eager to accompany him away from Luke Weller's hostelry. It meant that he feared Weller; it meant that Luke Weller was indeed very much mixed up in the affairs of the OK ranch. The Buddha-like hotel proprietor was the fiendish arch-plotter, his enemy, and, for some as yet unfathomed reason, the ruthless enemy of Rose Randall, And Falk knew the truth, was ready to betray the man he suspected planned to murder him.

Falk watched him anxiously. "Is it a deal?" He pulled a silk handkerchief from a pocket and wiped his perspiring face. He was growing frantic, heedless of caution. "Those papers," he babbled, "those papers you found under my pillow—"

"I have them safe," Lane reassured, with a thin smile. "What about

those papers, Falk?"

"It was Weller's idea," Falk said, a bit wildly. He knew he was talking too freely, but those papers would damn him no matter whether he confessed or not. "A forged deed, from Owen Keith to me. I was to give Weller a deed to him-fake a sale of the ranch to him."

"So that's the game." Lane's tone was grim. "You needn't do any more talking. Falk, if you'd rather not. You've told me more than enough."

"You'll turn me loose, Mory?" The lawyer's tone took on a hopeful

note. "I've put you on the right track. You won't need me."

Lane shook his head. "Nothing doing, Falk. I'll need you as a witness "

Falk stared at him venomously, his fat body slumped limply in his saddle. His gaze lowered to the gun in Lane's holster. He jerked his glance aside, afraid the young man might guess the desperate thought in his mind. A quick grab and the gun would be in his hand.

"I'll need you as a witness, Falk," repeated Lane. "Maybe I'll get

you off easy, for turning State's evidence."

"A lot of good that will do me," groaned the shyster. His hand suddenly darted to the holstered gun, jerked it free. "Damn you!" he shouted. "I've got you, Mory!" He backed the mare away, gun levelled, menacing the gray's tall rider. "I'll kill you!" he gloated.

The lawyer's triumph was short-lived. The gray horse reared even as the gun crashed. Falk lifted his hand for a second shot, dropped the gun with a scream of pain as Lane's heavy quirt smashed his wrist. He reeled, toppled sideways from the plunging and frightened mare. Lane heard him groan. The brown mare backed away, stood trembling.

Lane climbed from his saddle and went to the fallen man. Judson C. Falk had indeed made his escape-into another world. The plunging

mare's shod hoof had fairly shattered his skull.

Lane retrieved the gun and turned to his horse. Falk was a treacherous scoundrel, but the man's swift end made him feel a bit sick.

Horsemen were riding into the clearing, coming down trail. Lane could not have escaped unseen even if he had wanted to break for cover. He knew who these riders were. That tall man would be Sam Hally, and his smaller companion would be Seth McGee. He was wrong about the latter, Lane saw with suprise. It was old Cimarron Smith, riding by Sam's side. He carried his arm in a sling. Two other horsemen made up the party. Seth McGee was one. He was leading a horse on which sat the OK man Squint Roan, securely lashed to the saddle.

Sam reined his horse, threw the dead man a brief glance, then looked at Lane. His smile was rather wintry. He could visiualize what had happened.

"Glad to see you, son," he greeted simply. "Reckon Jim Brent got real busy an' got you out of that jail, huh?"

"Haven't seen the sheriff," Lane told him dryly. "Got myself out,

picked up Falk on the way out of town."

They listened in silence to his brief account of Falk's attempt to

kill him.
"Where did you run into our friend Squint Roan?" he grinned. He

"Where did you run into our friend Squint Roan?" he grinned. He stared curiously at the bound man.

Seth McGee answered in his high, deadly voice. "Caught him an' another jasper snoopin' around. They figgered to git Cimarron." Seth grinned. "Takin' Squint to jail. The other feller don't need no jail." His tone was significant.

"Reckon they trailed me from town," put in Sam. "Squint owns up that Luke Wellet told him to get me if they could, an' make shore they got Cimarron. Seems Cimarron knows too much to suit Weller."

"The doggone ol' sneakin' coyote!" shrilled the weazened little OK puncher. 'I short knows plenty I'm explodin' to tell you."

Sam Hally shook his head gravely. "Shore had us all fooled, Weller did, settin' thar in his big porch chair, always so soft an' lazy-like. He never seemed to get excited about nothin'."

Lane nodded. He was still a bit dazed by Falk's revelations about Luke Weller, and yet he was not as surprised as he might have been. Weller had always affected him unpleasantly. He looked at the bound OK man grimly.

"Was Weller back of the killings on the Lazy R, Squint?"

"Reckon he was," muttered the man sullenly.

"Who killed Bill Randall?"

Squint hesitated, cowered under the implacable eyes fixed on him. "Ash Burr," he mumbled. "The ol' man caught him runnin' off some stock, so Ash filled him with lead."

"How about those other killings?" persisted Lane. "Hank Sells, for instance?"

"Ain't talkin' no more," muttered Squint. He licked dry lips, "You

cain't pin none of them killin's on me."

"I'm thinkin' we can, Squint," rumbled Sam Hally. "Don't you worry, feller, you'll have plenty company when you dance on air."

The man cursed him.

"What shall we do with-with Falk?" Lane's gaze went to the dead crook.

"Leave him lay," rasped Seth McGee. "Right now we aim to go after Weller. No time to fool with this piece of buzzards' meat."

Rapidly approaching hoofbeats drifted up on the wind. Same spoke softly, and reined his horse back into the willows. His companions likewise sought cover.

The oncoming rider drew into the clearing, a vague shape in the darkness. There was something familiar about the erect, slight man in the saddle. Lane heard a low chuckle from Sam, a loud, startled exclamation from the newcomer as he suddenly drew rein and stared at the body which was sprawling limply across the trail.

Sam called softly from the willows.

"Hello, Jim!"

An astonished grunt came from the sheriff,

"What the devil!" he spluttered. "Who's this dead hombre clutterin' up the trail."

The sheriff's eyes fastened on Lane, flicked a glance at the riderless brown mare, and swung back to the dead man. He had never seen Falk before, but he read a story here that explained the second horse Lane had required from Murphy,

"You bring this feller from town, Mory?" He snapped the question

curtly.

"I brought him," admitted Lane, and added dryly, "He called himself the president of the OK Land and Cattle Company. I thought he could tell me some things I wanted to know."

The sheriff's shrewd eves went around the circle of grim faces. They knew, he guessed, about Luke Weller. Lane confirmed his surmise,

"This man Falk confessed," he told the sheriff. He gestured at Squint Roan. "That fellow has admitted Weller is the man back of the Lazy R killings, that Burr murdered Bill Randall. I want Weller and Burr arrested, Sheriff, for conspiracy to defraud, for murder-and attempted murder."

"Ash Burr is dead," Jim Brent informed them. "Dead as this feller layin' here in the trail. Weller's Mexican knifed him." He looked soberly at Lane. "Weller must have known the game was up," he went on, "He's skipped-taken Rose Randall with him."

Horror held his listeners dumbstruck. The sheriff went on with his tale, his words beating hammer blows at Lane's stunned ears.

"Tim Hook found Burr dvin', and Burr said to get word to youthat you were the only man that could beat Weller."

Rain began to sprinkle, made a hissing sound in the willows. Lane

suddenly found old Cimarron Smith by his side.
"Listen, son," muttered the veteran, "I gotta good idee whar Wel-

ler'll likely hole up tonight till this storm clears up." His voice was confident. "Reckon I'm the only man as knows Weller's secret hideout, 'cept Burr, mebbe, an' that skunk is daid, the sheriff says."

Hope surged back. Lane suddenly seemed to tower over his companions, gigantic and terrible, a devastating force that lived only for

the destruction of the infamous Weller.

"I'm going with Cimarron," he told them. His voice was quietly commanding, the voice of authority. "The rest of you scatter. Each of you do what you think best. I'm going with Cimarron."

THE STORM SWEPT DOWN from the higher mountains, brought a cold, drenching rain that beat at their faces. Rose kept fairly dry under the poncho Weller made the Mexican slip over her head.

One thought alone kept the girl from surrendering to despair. Lane Mory had escaped. He still lived, and while he lived she could not

abandon all hope. She clung to the thought of Lane.

It was too dark to more than guess they were in one of the numerous desert canyons, and presently they rode out of the rain and into the deeper blackness of a great cavern. Weller came to her and loosened the rope. His touch sent shivers through her, and when he attempted to lift her down she pushed him away with her bound hands.

"I can manage," she said curtly.

She scrambled from the saddle and stood uncertainly in the circle of light from a lantern in the Mexican's hand. She was stiff and sore and completely miserable, but resolved to show no fear.

Manuel brought dry wood and lighted a fire, and at a gesture from

Weller he went to the girl and pulled off the damp poncho.

Manuel disappeared with the horses into the blackness beyond the circle of light. Luke Weller stood by the fire, warming his hands and staring at her.

"Looks like we'll be here till mornin'," he said. "Need daylight to cross the creek, runnin' bank-full after all this rain."

Rose shrugged her shoulders, looked at her chafed wrists.

"They hurt," she told him.

He untied the thongs. 'No chance for you to get away," he said.

"You wouldn't get far-not with Manuel after you."

"No," she admitted, "not much chance." Her tone was purposely dejected. Anything to lull his suspicions. If she could trick them she would. Her only chance was to use her wits. She wanted the freedom of her hands and feet. "Don't worry," she said. "I won't be foolish." She gazed curiously at the cheerless surroundings.

"Sort of secret hide-out I been keepin' ready for a quick jump when the time came," Weller informed her. "Only ten miles to the border."
He pointed to a pile of boulders. "Got a hundred thousand dollars in gold hid under them rocks. Kept it there to be handy for a time like this."

"You're a smart man, Mr. Weller. You don't leave much to chance."

"Not me," bragged the man. "I get my way, sooner or later-like I've got you-at last."

Rose repressed a shudder.

"Yes, I been wantin' you for a long time," he went on, in his wheezy voice. "Told your grandfather a year or two back that I was wantin' to marry you. He took his quirt to me-kicked me off the ranch-said he'd use his gun on me if I come around again." Weller's sides quivered with his hateful silent laughter. "Heard you call me a funny fat man one time. Ain't forgot how you seemed to think I was somethin' to laugh at. Never did like to be laughed at, but your grandfather paid plenty for that quirtin', his insults."

Rose stared at him with growing horror. She knew what he was

about to divulge.

"Told Bill Randall I'd get even with him." Weller went on, "I set Ash Burr on him. Ash killed him," He chuckled. "Ash figgered he'd get you an' the ranch. He figgered wrong. Wasn't my plan to let the fool have nothin' but Manuel's knife in his back when I was done usin' him." His sides shook again. "Looks like I'm havin' the last laugh now, Rose. Mebbe you won't think I'm such a funny fat man no more. I ain't got the Lazy R, but I got you."

"You-you beast!" she said in a whisper. "You killed my grandfather. You tricked Ash Burr into murdering my grandfather!"

"He got in my way," Luke Weller said placidly. A scowl darkened his face. "Young Mory also got in my way, but I'm payin' him back too, taking you off with me."

"You beast!" repeated the girl fiercely. "Lane Mory will get you vet-kill you!"

"I reckon he won't," returned Weller placidly, "He's some smart, but I'm smarter."

The Mexican glided up with a coffee-pot and crouched over the coals.

"I'll tend to it," Weller told him. "You get busy with your packing, Manuel."
"Si. senor."

The man set to work on the pile of rocks, uncovering some half-dozen canyas bags, which he carried to the pack-saddle.

The coffee came to a boil. Weller filled a tin cup for the girl. She forced herself to drink.

"Seems like the rain don't sound so loud," he observed. "Go take a look, Manuel. If them clouds break it'll soon be light enough for us to ford the creek."

"Si, senor. I look." The Mexican disappeared down the black tunnel that led to the outside. Rose put her cup beside her on the bench and stood up.

"I'd like to stretch a bit," she said. "I'm stiff from the ride—those

ropes."
"Keep where I can see you," Weller warned sharply. "No tricks,

girl!"
"How can I get away with Manuel out there?"

Weller glanced over his shoulder at the wall of darkness behind him. "You couldn't get past him," he agreed. "That Mexican's got cat's eves."

Rose paced up and down, careful to keep in the zone of light. She knew escape was impossible from that place, with the Mexican somewhere near the entrance to the cave.

She heard Manuel returning from his inspection of the weather. Or was it Manuel? Rose came to a standstill, held her breath. Not the Mexican's cat-like glide, those footsteps. Her heart leaped, and she gave Weller a cautious look. He was stitting with his back to the entrance, she realized.

Rose found herself suddenly cool. Her mind raced. She must hold Weller's attention, keep him from chancing to hear those stealthy footsteps. She turned into the darkness beyond the firelight. Weller sprang to his feet.

"Come back!" He spoke crossly. "Keep where I can see you!"

Rose faced around, saw him coming towards her, and saw too a vague movement in the darkness behind him.

Weller halted, peered uncertainly. "Can't see you," he grumbled. His annoyance mounted. "Come back here."

A high shape materialized from the walling darkness beyond the fire. Rose stifled a cry. She must continue to rivet Weller's attention on herself, keep him from looking behind him.

"I-I'm not running away." She fried to speak casually. "Can't you see me?"

He continued to peer towards her, and evidently now heard the softly approaching footsteps.

"Manuel!" His tone was irate, "Come and tie her up-"

Weller's voice faded to a wheezy gurgle. Something hard was pressing against his backbone. He went rigid.

"Up with you hands, Weller!" he heard Lane Mory say. "You're

not tying anybody up any more."

A terrible scream broke from the fat man. He whirled with incredible swiftness and seized Lane in bear-like arms. In a moment the two men were locked in a death struggle.

Hurled off his balance by the unexpected furious onslaught, Lane staggered backward. Weller had his arms pinned, and he was unable

to lift the gun. The man's strength was amazing.

They crashed into the blazing fire. Lane's boots and his leather chaps protected him. Weller was less fortunate. He loosed an agonized yelp, involuntarily relaxed his terrible embrace. Lane pushed him back and whipped a terrific right to the chin. The blow rocked the big man back on his heels. He shook his head like a maddened buil and jerked a gun from inside his coat. His reach for the weapon was lightning fast—but not quite fast enough. Lane's long Colt crashed, and through the haze of smoke he saw Weller sway, like a great tree tottering to the severing blows of a woodman's axe.

"You—you're smart, Mory." He grimaced. "Too smart—for me..." He was suddenly down on his face, shuddering and twitching.

... 'He was suddenly down on his lace, shuddering and twitching.

Shapes pushed through the murk from the mouth of the cave—Cimarron Smith and a very frightened and securely bound Manuel. Cimar-

ron gave the dead man a brief glance.
"The end of the trail for him," he muttered. "Good work, boss."

Lane scarcely heard him. He was looking at Rose.

She came slowly towards him from out of that darkness, wordless, but her lips were parted breathlessly, and the light in her eyes said more than many words.

The gun fell from Lane's hand. He went to meet her.

Cimarron Smith's big .45 poked his swarthy prisoner in the ribs.

"Git moving outside, feller," he said softly. "The boss ain't needin' me round right now."

KINCAID OF RED BUTTE

by L. ERNENWEIN

Marshal Kincaid was stepping up to the saloon stoop when a shot blasted inside — a shot backwashed by instant silence in the saloon. Instinctively drawing his guns, Kincaid rushed to the bat-wing gates, saw a man back away from the poker table where Slicky Ramada's lolling head lay in a pool of blood.

The retreating stranger held a gun in his right hand and a well-filled money sack in his left. The stranger said flatly: "First man moves dies!"

Whereupon Marshal Kincaid called sharply: "Drop that gun!"

Men called the tough two gun marshal of Red Butte Junction "Killer" Kincaid, saying he had frost in his heart and sleet in his veins This is Kincaid's story. But because it involves the very essence of those halcyon days when the West was a rough-and-tumble frontier, it is also a part and parcel of the most glamorous chapter of American history, with all the pungent, devil-bedamned flavor of the era.

Ride with Kincaid into a roaring boom town at the end of steel where rowdy, robust men buy their booze and buck the tiger; and listen to guns blast to the tune of pianos playing *Ta-ra-ra-ra Boom De-ay!*

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